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No. 12

The Death-Shot; OR, TRACKED TO DEATH.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID,
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PROLOGUE.

A PRAIRIE, treeless, shrubless, smooth as a sleeping sea. Grass upon it; but so short, that the smallest quadruped might not cross over without being seen. Even a crawling reptile could scarce find concealment among its tufts.

Objects are upon it—sufficiently visible to be distin-

And not unseen by human eye. For there is one sees—one who has reason to fear them.

Their eager, excited movements show that they are anticipating a repast; at the same time their attitudes tell, they have not yet commenced it.

Something appears in their midst. At intervals they approach it: the birds swooping from above, the beasts crouching along the sward. They go close, almost to touching it, then suddenly withdraw, starting back as in affright!

After a time they return again, but only to be frayed as before. And so on, in a series of approaches and recessions.

What can be the object thus keeping them off? Surely no common quarry, as the dead body of deer, antelope, or mustang? It cannot be this; nor yet carcass of any kind. It cannot be a thing that is dead. Nor does it look like anything alive. Seen from a distance it resembles a human head; nearer, the resem-

are glancing—glaring—rolling. By heavens! the head is alive!

No wonder the wolves start back in affright; no wonder the vultures, after swooping down, ply their wings in quick, nervous stroke, and soar up again! The strange thing seems to puzzle both—baffles their instinct, and keeps them at bay.

Still know they, or seem to fancy, 'tis flesh and blood. Sight and scent tell them it is; by both they cannot be deceived.

And living flesh it must be! A death's head could neither flash its eyes, nor cause them to turn in their sockets. Besides, the predatory creatures have other evidence of its being alive. At intervals there is opened a mouth, showing two rows of white teeth. From between comes a shout that startles and sends them afar.

The cry is only put forth, when they approach too threateningly near—evidently intended to keep them at a distance. It has done so for most part of the day.



THE EYES ARE NOT CLOSED, NOT GLASSED. THEY ARE GLANCING—GLARING—ROLLING. BY HEAVENS! THE HEAD IS ALIVE!

rushed at some distance. But they are of a character scarce deserving a glance from the passing traveler. He would hardly deem it worth while to turn his eyes toward a pack of prairie wolves—coyotes—much less go in chase of them.

With vultures soaring above, he might be more disposed to hesitate and reflect. The foul birds and filthy beasts, seen together, would be proof of prey—that some quarry had fallen upon the plain. It might be a stricken stag, a prong-horn antelope, or a wild horse crippled by some mischance due to his headlong nature.

Believing it any of these, the traveler would give loose rein to his steed and ride onward; leaving the beasts and birds to their banquet.

There is no traveler passing over the prairie in question; no human being in sight. But there are wolves grouped upon the ground, and vultures hovering in the air above them.

blance grows stronger; close up, it is complete. Certainly, it is a human head—the head of a man!

What is there to cause surprise? A man's head seen upon a Texan prairie! Nothing, if lying there scalpless. It would only prove that some ill-starred individual—traveler, trapper, or hunter of wild horses—has been struck down by the savages; and afterward decapitated, as well as scalped.

But this head—if head it be—is not scalped. It still carries its hair—a fine chevelure, waving and profuse. Nor is it lying along the ground, as it naturally would, abandoned, after being despoiled of its trophy. On the contrary, it stands erect upon the sward—the chin almost touching the surface—square, as if still upon the shoulders from which it has been separated! With cheeks pallid or blood-bedaubed, and eyes closed or glassy, this—the position—need not so much surprise. But there is neither pallor nor blood-stain on the cheeks; and the eyes are not closed, not glassed. They

Twilight approaching, spreads its purple tints over the prairie. It is on. There is no change in the attitude of the assailed, or assailants. There is light enough to show the flash of those fiery eyes; whose glance of menace still masters the voracious instincts of the animals.

Strange spectacle! The head of a man, without any body—set square upon the ground; with eyes in it that scintillate and see, a mouth that opens, and shows teeth; a throat from which issue sounds evidently of human intonation: around this object of almost supernatural aspect, a group of gray wolves, and over it a flock of black vultures!

Through the day, and into twilight, the tableau remains unchanged. Only a change in the disposition of the figures—in the attitudes of the beasts and birds. The head keeps its place and position. It makes no motion, save the parting of the lips, and the rolling of the eyeballs.

On a Texan prairie twilight is short. There are no mountains or high hills intervening—no obliquity in the sun's diurnal course, to lengthen out the day. When the golden orb sinks behind the horizon, a short-lived light of purplish tint succeeds—then night.

Night approaches. It is on.

With the darkness comes a change. The vultures, obedient to their customary habit—not nocturnal—take departure from the spot, and wing their way to some well-known roosting-place. On the contrary, the wolves stay. Night is the time best suited to their ravening instincts. Under its shadows they may have more hope of at length devouring that thing of spherical shape, that by shouts and scowling glances has so long held them aloof.

To their discomfort, the twilight is very soon succeeded by a magnificent moon; whose silvery effulgence shed over the prairie almost equals the light of day. It shows the eyes yet angrily glancing; while in the nocturnal stillness that cry, sent through the parted lips, is as awe-inspiring as ever.

It still keeps the assailants at bay.

And, now, more than ever, does the tableau appear strange—more than ever unlike reality. Under the moonlight, with a filmy haze spread over the prairie sward, the human head seems magnified to the dimensions of the sphinx; while, from the same cause, the coyotes look as large as Canadian stags!

In truth, a singular spectacle—one full of weird mystery!

Who can explain it?

CHAPTER I.

TWO SORTS OF SLAVE-OWNERS.

In the old slave-owning times of the Southern United States—happily now no more—there was much grievance to humanity; proud oppression upon the one side, and sad suffering on the other.

It is true, that the majority of the slave proprietors were humane men. Some of them even philanthropic, in their way, and inclined toward giving to the unholy institution a color of *patriarchism*. The idea—delusive, as intended to delude—is old as slavery itself; at the same time, modern as Mormonism; where it has had its latest, and coarsest illustration.

Though it cannot be denied, that the slavery of the States was in many instances of a mild type, neither can it be questioned, that there were cases of lamentable harshness—even to inhumanity. There were slave-owners who were kind, and slave-owners who were cruel.

Not far from the town of Natchez, in the State of Mississippi, lived two planters; whose lives illustrated the extremes of these two types. Though their estates lay adjacent, their characters were as opposite as could well be conceived in the scale of manhood and morality. Colonel Archibald Armstrong—a true Southerner of the old Virginian aristocracy, who had entered Mississippi State when the Choctaw Indians evacuated it—was a model of the kind slave-master; while Ephraim Darke—a Massachusetts man, who had moved thither at a much later period—was a fair specimen of the cruel. Coming from the New England States, sprung from the Puritans—a people whose descendants have made both profession and sacrifice in the cause of negro emancipation—this may seem strange. It is, however, a common tale; which no traveler through the Southern States can help hearing. Every day will he be told, that the hardest taskmaster of the slave is either one who has been a slave himself, or a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers, who landed on Plymouth Rock! Having a respect for many points in the character of these same Pilgrim Fathers, I would fain think the accusation untrue, and that Ephraim Darke was an exception.

In his case, there was no falsehood in it—none whatever. Throughout the Mississippi valley, there was nothing more vile than his treatment of the black bondsmen, whose hard lot it was to have him for their master. Around his courts, and in his cotton-fields, the crack of the whip was heard almost continually—its thong sharply felt by the sable-skinned victims of his caprice or malice. The "cowhide" was constantly carried by himself, his son, and overseer. None of the three ever went abroad without that pliant, painted switch—a very emblem of devilish cruelty—in their hands; never came home without having used it in the castigation of some unfortunate "darkey," whose evil star had thrown him in their track, while making the rounds of the plantation.

It was the very reverse with his neighbor, Archibald Armstrong—whose slaves seldom went to bed without a prayer upon their lips, that said, "God bress de good massa;" while the poor whipped bondmen of Ephraim Darke, their backs still smarting from the lash, nightly lay down, not always to sleep, but always with curses on their lips.

Alas! the old story, of like cause bringing about like result, is what must be chronicled in this case. The man of the Devil prospered; while he of God decayed. Colonel Armstrong, open-hearted, generous, indulging in a profuse hospitality, lived outside the income accruing

from the culture of his cotton-fields. In time he became the debtor of Ephraim Darke, who lived within his.

There was not much intimacy or friendship between the two men. The proud Virginian, come of an old Highland family—gentry in the colonial times—felt some contempt for his neighbor, a descendant of the Mayflower steerage passengers.

For all this, he was not above accepting a loan from Darke, which the latter had been eager to give. The Massachusetts man had long coveted the Southerner's fine estate; and knew that a mortgage-deed is the first entering of a wedge, in time pretty sure to bring about possession of the *fee simple*.

So stood things between these two neighboring planters. Darke had determined on becoming the proprietor of both plantations; while the affairs of Armstrong, gradually growing desperate, had at length reached a point that promised his neighbor all he had been scheming to obtain. The debtor had fallen behind in the payment of interest. The mortgage could at any moment be foreclosed. Colonel Armstrong was in danger of losing his estate.

At this crisis came a circumstance, likely to modify, if not altogether defeat, the design of the creditor. Ephraim Darke had a son approaching manhood, by name Richard, by nature like himself, only of a still inferior type of humanity. For the grasping selfishness of the extreme Puritan is not improved by mixture with the opposite extreme of Southern licentiousness; and in the character of Richard Darke the two were commingled. Mean in the matter of personal expenditure, he was at the same time of dissipated and disorderly habits; the associate of the poker-playing and cock-fighting fraternity of the neighborhood; one of its wildest youth, without any of those generous traits sometimes coupled with such a character.

He was Ephraim Darke's only son—therefore heir-presumptive to all his property—slaves and plantation. Being thoroughly in his father's confidence, he was aware of the probability of a proximate reversion to the slaves and plantation of Colonel Armstrong.

But, much as Richard Darke liked money, there was something he coveted more. This was Colonel Armstrong's daughter. There were two of them, Helen and Jessie, both pretty girls. Helen, the elder, was more than pretty, she was beautiful—by all acknowledged as the beauty of the neighborhood.

Richard Darke was in love with her, as much as his selfish heart would allow—perhaps the only unselfish passion he had ever felt. His father sanctioned, or at all events did not oppose it. For this wild, wicked youth had gained a wonderful ascendancy over a parent, who had trained him to trickery equaling his own.

With the power of creditor over debtor—a debt that could be demanded at any moment—a mortgage to the full amount and not easily transferred—the Darkes seemed to have the vantage-ground, and might dictate their own terms.

The son had been for some time paying his attentions to Helen Armstrong, whenever an opportunity occurred—at balls, *barbecues*, and the like; of late, also, at her father's house. There, the power spoken of gave him admittance; while the consciousness of possessing it, hindered him from noticing the reluctance with which he was received. For all, he could not fail to perceive, that his assiduities were coldly met by her to whom his homage was extended.

He wondered why, too. He knew that Helen Armstrong had many admirers. It could not be otherwise with one so beautiful, and, beside, so gifted. But among them there was none for whom she had shown the slightest partiality. This was notorious. Darke himself had conceived a suspicion, that a young man, named Clancy—son of a decayed Irish gentleman, living near—had found favor in her eyes. Still, it was but a suspicion; and Clancy had gone to Texas the year before—sent, it was said, by his father, to look out for a new home. The latter had since died, leaving his widow sole occupant of an humble tenement, with a small holding of land near the borders of the Armstrong estate.

There was a report that young Clancy was soon coming back—was, indeed, every day expected. But what could it matter? The proud planter, Armstrong, was not the man to bestow his daughter upon a "poor white"—as Richard Darke scornfully styled his suspected rival.

Feeling confident of this, as also in the vantage-ground he himself held, the suitor of Helen Armstrong had resolved upon bringing things to an issue. His love for her had become a passion, the stronger for being checked. Her coldness might be but coquetry. He hoped and fancied it was; for he had no lack of either self-esteem or assurance. And he had reason for both. He was immensely rich, or would be when his father died. He was not ill-looking, but rather the reverse; and he had made more than one conquest among the young ladies of the neighborhood. It might be, Miss Armstrong's haughty disposition hindered her from being demonstrative! Perhaps she loved him without giving sign!

For months he had been cogitating in this un-

certain way, and had at length determined to bring matters to a crisis.

One morning he mounted his horse; rode across the boundary-line between the two plantations, and on to Colonel Armstrong's house; requested an interview with the colonel's eldest daughter; obtained it; made a declaration of his love; asked her to have him for a husband; and received for response a chilling negative.

As he went back through the woods, the birds were trilling among the trees. It was their merry morning lay, but it gave him no gladness. There was still ringing in his ears that harsh monosyllable "*no*." The wild-wood songsters seemed to echo it, as if mockingly; the blue jay and red cardinal scolding him for intrusion on their domain.

After crossing the boundary between the two plantations, he reined up his horse, and looked back. His brow was black with chagrin; his lips white with rage. It was suppressed no longer. Curses came hissing through his teeth, along with the words—

"In less than six weeks these woods will be mine; and d— me if I don't shoot every bird that roosts in them! Then, Miss Helen Armstrong, you'll not be so conceited of yourself. It will be different, when you haven't got a roof over your head! So good-by, sweetheart; good-by to you!"

"Now, dad!" he continued, in fancy apostrophizing his father, "now you can take your own way, as you've been long wanting. Yes, my respected parent; you are free to put in the execution—the sheriff's officers—anything you like."

Angrily grinding his teeth, he dug the spurs into his horse's ribs, and rode on—the short bitter syllable still ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER II.

TWO GOOD GIRLS.

RICHARD DARKE had not long parted from the presence of the lady who so laconically rejected him, when another stood by her side.

A man also, though no rival to him,—neither lover nor suitor. The venerable white-haired gentleman, who came into the room, was Helen Armstrong's father.

His voice, on entering, told that he had a suspicion of what had been Darke's errand.

He was soon made certain by his daughter freely confessing it.

He said in reply:

"I supposed that to be the fellow's purpose; though, at such an early hour, I might have feared its being worse."

"Worse! Feared! Father, what could you have feared?"

"Never mind, Helen; nothing that concerns you. Tell me: in what way did you give him the answer?"

"In one little word. I simply said *no*."

"That little word will be enough. Oh Heaven! what will become of us?"

"Father!" exclaimed the beautiful girl, laying her hand upon his shoulder, with a searching look into his eyes; "why do you speak thus? Are you angry with me for refusing him? Surely you would not wish me to be the wife of Richard Darke?"

"You do not love him, Helen?"

"Love him! Can you ask? Who could love that man?"

"Then you would not marry him?"

"Would not—I could not. He has no heart but the heart of a villain. I would prefer death to such a husband as he."

"Enough. I must submit to my fate—to ruin."

"Ruin! Father; what is the meaning of this? There is some secret—some danger. Trust me, dear father! Let me know what it is!"

"I may well do that, since it cannot be much longer a secret. There is danger, Helen—the danger of debt. I am in debt to the father of Richard Darke—deeply so—completely in his power. Everything I possess, land, houses, slaves, may become his at any hour; to-morrow, if he will it. Nay, he is sure to will it, now. Your little word '*No*' will bring about a great change—the crisis I have been so long apprehending. Never mind! Let it come. I must meet it like a man. It is for you, dear Helen—you and Jessie, that I grieve. Poor girls, what a change in your prospects! Poverty, coarse fare, coarse garments to wear, and a log cabin to live in. Henceforth, this must be your lot. I can hope for no other."

"And what of all that, father? What care we? I, for one, do not; and I'm sure sister will say the same. But is there no way to—"

"Release me from debt, you would say? You need not ask that. I have spent many a sleepless night over it. No; there was only that one way. I never before spoke, or even thought, of it. I knew it would not do. I knew you did not love Richard Darke, and would not consent to marry him. You could not, my child—could you?"

Helen Armstrong did not make immediate answer; though she had one in her heart, ready to leap to her lips.

Marry Richard Darke! Wretch, worthless, with all his riches; dissipated, wicked of soul, craven of spirit, coward as she deemed him!

Marry such a man, while another man that to her, seemed possessed of every noble quality, beauty of person, boldness of spirit, purity of heart—in short, everything that makes heroism! This other man, too, having confessed that he loved her! To such as she it made no difference about his being poor in purse, which he was; nor would it, had he been beneath her in social rank, which he was not. Her answer would have been all the same; and she only hesitated giving it, from a thought that it might add to the weight of unhappiness at the moment pressing upon her father.

Mistaking her silence, and perhaps with the specter of poverty before him—inciting to meanness, as it oft does the noblest natures—he said:

"Helen! could you marry him?"

He meant Richard Darke.

"Speak candidly," he continued, "and take time to reflect before answering. If you think you could not be contented, happy, with him for your husband, better it should never be.

—another girl, almost beautiful as herself, only a year or two younger.

"Not only my affection," she said, at sight of the new comer, "but Jessie's as well. Won't he, sister?"

Jessie, wondering what it was all about, nevertheless saw that something was wanted of her. She had caught the word "affection," at the same time observing the troubled expression upon her father's face. This, with her sister's attitude, decided her; and, gliding forward, in another instant she was by his side, clinging to the opposite shoulder; she too, with one hand rested gently upon his head.

Thus grouped, the three figures composed a family picture, expressive of purest love. The white-haired, white-mustached colonel, veteran of more than one campaign, in the center; on each side a fair girl, twining alabaster arms around his neck. And yet the two different as if no kinship existed between them—Helen of gipsy darkness, Jessie, bright as a summer beam.

having little else to do, passed a good deal of his time scouring the country in pursuit of his father's advertised runaways. Having caught them, he would claim the "bounty," just as if they belonged to a stranger. Darke pere paid it without grudge or grumbling—perhaps the only disbursement he ever made in such mood. It was like taking out of one pocket to put into the other. Besides, he was rather proud of his son's acquitting himself so shrewdly.

Skirting the two plantations, with others in the same line of settlements, was a cypress swamp. It extended along the edge of the great river, covering an area of many square miles. Beside being a swamp, it was a network of creeks, bayous, and lagoons, often inundated, and only passable by means of skiff or canoe. In most places it was a slough of soft mud, where man might not tread, nor any kind of water-craft make way. Over it, at all times, hung the obscurity of twilight. The solar rays, however bright above, could not penetrate its thick canopy of cypress tops, loaded with



"SHE SENT IT ME THIS VERY MORNING. COME, CLANCY! TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK OF THE LIKENESS?"—Page 5.

Consult your own heart, my child, and do not be swayed by me or my necessities. Say, could you marry him?"

"Father, I have said. You have spoken of a change in our circumstances—of poverty, and other ills. Let them come! For myself I care not. Only for you. But if to me the alternative were death, I've told you, dear father—I tell you again—I would rather that than be the wife of Richard Darke."

"Then his wife you shall never be! Let the subject drop. Let the ruin fall! Now to prepare ourselves for poverty and Texas!"

"Texas, if you will, but not poverty. No, father, not that. The wealth of affection will make you feel rich; and in a lowly hut, as in this our grand mansion, you shall still have mine."

On saying this, the beautiful girl flung herself upon her father's breast, one hand resting upon his shoulder, the other laid gently on his head. The door opened. Another entered the room

It would have been a pleasing tableau to one who knew nothing of what had brought the three thus together; or even knowing this, to him truly comprehending it. For in the faces of all beamed affection, that bespoke well for their future, and showed no distrustful fear of either poverty or Texas.

CHAPTER III.

A FOREST POST-BOX.

EPHRAIM DARKE'S harsh treatment of his slaves had the usual effect—it caused them occasionally to "abscond." Then it became necessary to insert an advertisement in the country newspaper, offering a reward for the runaways. Thus cruelty proved expensive.

In planter Darke's case, however, the cost was partially recouped by the cleverness of his son, who was a noted "nigger-catcher," and kept dogs for the especial purpose. He had a natural penchant for this kind of chase; and,

that strangest of parasitical plants, the *tillandsia usneoides*.

This tract of forest offered a safe place of concealment for runaway slaves; and as such was it noted throughout the neighborhood. A "darkey" absconding from any of the near-lying plantations was as sure to make for it, as would a chased rabbit for its warren.

Somber and gloomy though it was, around its edge was the favorite scouting-ground of Richard Darke. To him the cypress swamp was a preserve, as a coppice to the pheasant-shooter, or a scrubwood to the hunter of foxes. With the difference, that his game was human, and therefore the pursuit of it more exciting.

There were places in the swamp to which he had never penetrated—large tracts unexplored, and where exploration could not be made without much difficulty. But to enter the swamp was not absolutely necessary. The slaves, who sought asylum there, could not always remain within its gloomy recesses. Food must be ob-

tained beyond its border, or starvation would be their fate. For this reason the refugee required some mode of communicating with the outside world. It was usually by means of a confederate—some old friend and fellow-slave upon one of the adjacent plantations—privy to the secret of his hiding-place. On this necessity the negro-catcher most depended; having often found the stalk—or “still-hunt,” in backwoods phraseology—more profitable than a pursuit with trained hounds.

About a month after his rejection by Miss Armstrong, Richard Darke was out upon a chase, as usual along the edge of the cypress swamp. Rather should it be called a search: since he had found no traces of the game that had tempted him forth. This was a fugitive negro—one of the best field-hands belonging to his father's plantation—who had absconded, and could not be found.

For several weeks “Jupiter,” as the runaway was called, had been missing; and his description, with the reward attached, had appeared in the county newspaper. Richard Darke, having suspicion that he was hiding somewhere in the swamp, had made several excursions thither, in the hope of lighting upon his tracks. But Jupiter was an astute fellow, and had hitherto contrived to leave no trace that could in any way contribute to his capture.

Darke was returning home, after an unsuccessful day's search, in anything but a pleasant mood. It was not so much from having failed in obtaining traces of the missing slave. That was but a matter of money; and, as he had plenty, the disappointment could be borne. It was the thought of Helen Armstrong—of his scorned suit and blighted love prospects—that gave austerity to his reflections.

They had been further embittered by a circumstance that had since occurred. Charles Clancy had returned from Texas. Some one had told Darke of his being seen with Helen Armstrong—alone. Such an interview could not have been with her father's consent, but clandestine. So much the more aggravating to him—Dick Darke.

He had left the swamp behind, and was making his way through a tract of woodland which separated his father's plantation from that of his neighbor, when he saw something that promised relief to his perturbed spirit. It was a woman coming through the woods, and from the direction of Colonel Armstrong's house.

It was not Colonel Armstrong's daughter. He did not for a moment suppose it was she. Not likely, in such a solitary place, so far from the plantation-house. But, if not the young lady herself, it was her representative—her maid—a mulatto girl named Julia. Darke recognized her at a glance, even in the far distance and under the dim shadow of the trees.

“Thank God for the devil's luck!” he muttered, as the girl first came in sight. “It's Jupiter's sweetheart; his Juno or Leda, yellow-skinned like himself. There can be no doubt about her being on the way to keep an appointment with him. No more than I shall be present at that interview. Two hundred dollars reward for old Jude, and the fun of giving the d—d nigger a good hiding, once I have him home. Keep on, Jupe, my girl! You'll track him up for me better than the best bloodhound in my kennel.”

While making this soliloquy, the speaker withdrew himself behind a bush; and, concealed by its thick foliage, kept his eye on the mulatto wench, still wending her way among the tree trunks.

There was no path, and she was evidently proceeding by stealth—giving him reason to believe she was on the errand conjectured.

Richard Darke had no doubt of her being *en route* to an interview with Jupe; and he felt as good as certain of soon discovering, and securing, the runaway who had so long contrived to elude him.

When the girl had passed the place of his concealment—which she soon after did—he slipped out from behind the bush, and followed her with stealthy tread, taking care to keep cover between them.

It was not long before she came to a stop; under a grand magnolia, whose spreading branches, with their large, laurel-like leaves, shadowed a vast circumference of ground.

Darke, who had again taken stand behind some bushes, where he had a full view of her movements, watched them with eager eyes. Two hundred dollars at stake—two hundred for himself, fifteen hundred for his father—Jupe's market value—no wonder he was on the alert.

What was his astonishment, on seeing the girl take a letter from her pocket, and, standing on tiptoe, drop it into a knot-hole in the magnolia!

This done, she turned her back upon the tree; and, without staying longer under its shadow, started back along the path by which she had come—evidently going home again.

The negro-catcher was not only surprised, but chagrined. A double disappointment—the anticipation of earning two hundred dollars and giving his old slave the lash—both pleasant, both foiled!

Still remaining in concealment, he permitted the girl to go unmolested; not moving till she

was quite out of his sight. There might be some secret in the letter to concern, perhaps console, him. If so, it would soon be his.

And it soon was his, though not to console him. Whatever were the contents of that epistle, so cunningly deposited, Richard Darke, on becoming acquainted with them, reeled like a drunken man, and, to save himself from falling, sought support against the tree.

After a time, recovering, he re-read the letter, and gazed at a picture—a photograph—which the envelope also inclosed.

Then from his lips came speech, low-muttered—words of fearful menace, made emphatic by an oath.

A man's name might have been heard among his mutterings. It was Charles Clancy.

As he strode away from the spot, the firm-set lips, with the angry scintillation of his eyes, told that Clancy's life was in danger.

CHAPTER IV.

A PHOTOGRAPH IN THE FOREST.

On the third day after that when Richard Drake had abstracted the letter from the magnolia, a man was seen making his way along the edge of the cypress swamp. It was about the same hour of the evening, though the individual was altogether different. A young man, also; but unlike to Dick Darke as two men of similar age could well be to one another. In personal appearance, he was Darke's superior; in keenness of intellect, his equal; in morality, the very opposite. A figure of medium height, with limbs tersely set, and well proportioned, told of great strength; an elastic tread betokened activity; while features finely balanced, with an eagle eye and curving lips, proclaimed the possession of courage, equal to any demand that might be made upon it. A grand shock of waving hair, dark brown in color, gave the finishing touch to this fine countenance, as does the feather to a Tyrolean hat. He who possessed it was habited in a hunting costume; not for the chase on horseback, but afoot. He wore a shooting-coat of strong stuff, with short jack-boots, and gaiters buttoned above them. His hat was felt, with ibis feathers for a plume. In his hand he carried a gun, that at a glance could be seen to be a rifle; while by his side slouched a large dog—a cross between stag-hound and mastiff, with a touch of the terrier commingled. Such mongrel dogs are not always curs, but often the best for backwoods hunting, where keenness of scent needs to be supplemented by strength and stanchness.

It was Charles Clancy who was thus armed and attended. As already said, he was afoot, walking by the side of the cypress swamp. It was about two weeks after his return from Texas. He had come back to find himself fatherless; and since that stayed much at home to console his sorrowing mother. Only now and then had he gone forth to seek relaxation in the chase, and only on short excursions through the nearest tract of woodland. On this occasion he was returning with an empty game-bag; but in no way chagrined by his ill-success. For he had something else to console him; that which gave gladness to his heart—joy of the sweetest. She who had won that heart—Helen Armstrong—loved him. She had not told him so much in words; but there had been acts equally expressive, and to the full as convincing. They had met clandestinely, and in the same way corresponded; a tree in the forest serving them for post-office. All this through fear of her father. In the letters thus surreptitiously exchanged, only phrases of friendship had passed between them. But at their last meeting, Clancy had spoken words of love—fervent love, in its last appeal. He had avowed himself hers, and asked her to be his. She had resisted giving him an answer upon the spot, but promised it in writing. He would receive it in a letter, to be found in their forest post-office.

He was not dismayed at being thus put off. He supposed it to be but a whim of his sweetheart. He knew that, like the Anne Hathaway of Shakespeare, Helen Armstrong “had a way” of her own; for she was a girl of no ordinary character. Born and brought up in the backwoods, she possessed a spirit, free and independent, in keeping with the scenes and people that had surrounded her youth. So far from being deterred by her refusal to give him an immediate answer, Clancy but admired her the more. A proud she-eagle, that would not condescend to the soft cooing of the dove—even to speak acquiescence.

This would come in time—in a way not common—in the letter she had promised him. He would find that in the knot-hole of the magnolia.

And now, his day's hunting done, he was making his way for the tract of woodland in which stood the tree—proceeding toward it along the edge of the swamp.

He had no thought of stopping, or turning aside; nor would he have done so for any small game. But at that moment a deer—a grand antlered stag—hove in sight, heading in toward the swamp. Before Clancy could bring the gun to his shoulder, it passed the place where he

stood, loping on among the trunks of the trees. As it ran apparently unscared, he had hopes of again getting sight of it; and thus allured, he swerved out of his track, and went stalking after.

He had not proceeded above twenty paces, when a sound filled his ears, as well as the woods around. It was the report of a gun fired by some one almost beside him. And not at the deer, but himself! The shot came from behind, and he knew it had hit him. This, from a stinging sensation in his arm, like the touch of red-hot iron, or a drop of scalding water. Even then he might not have known it to be a bullet, but for the crack close following.

The wound—fortunately but a slight one—did not disable him. Like a tiger stung by javelins, he was round in an instant, ready to return the fire. There was no one in sight!

As there had been no warning—not a word—he could have no doubt of the intent: some one meant to murder him!

The report was that of a smoothbore—a fowling-piece loaded with ball. A conclusion quickly drawn hindered him from having any conjecture as to who had fired the shot, or why it had been fired. He was not traveling on a road frequented by robbers, but through a tract of timber in the Mississippi Bottom. He was sure of its being an attempt to assassinate him, and that there was but one man in the world capable of making it. Richard Darke was in his thoughts, as if the report of the gun had been a voice pronouncing his name.

Clancy's eyes, flashing angrily, interrogated the forest. The trees stood thick, the spaces between shadowy and somber. For it was a forest of cypresses, and the hour twilight.

He could see nothing but the tree-trunks and their branches, garlanded with the ghostly tillandsia, here and there draping to the ground. It baffled him, by its color and form—the gray festoonery having a resemblance to ascending smoke. He was looking for the smoke of the discharged gun.

He could see none. It must have puffed up suddenly to the tree-tops, and become commingled with the moss.

It did not matter much. Neither the darkness nor the close-standing trunks, hindered his dog from discovering the whereabouts of the would-be assassin. Giving a yelp, the animal sprang out, and off.

Before going twenty paces from the spot, it brought up aside the trunk of a tree, and there stood fiercely baying as if at a bear. The tree was a huge buttressed cypress, with “knees” several feet in height rising around. In the obscurity they might have been mistaken for men.

Clancy was soon among them; and saw standing, between two pilasters, the man who had meant to murder him.

There could be no question about the intent; and the motive was equally understood.

There was no effort at explanation. Clancy called for none. His rifle was already cocked; and, quick upon the identification of his adversary, came to his shoulder.

“Richard Darke!” he cried, “you've had the first shot. It's my turn now.”

As he spoke his finger pressed the trigger, and the bullet sped.

Darke, on seeing himself discovered, leaped out from his lurking-place to obtain more freedom of action. The buttresses hindered him from having elbow-room. He also raised his gun—a double-barrel; but, thinking it too late, instead of pulling the trigger he lowered the piece again, and dodged back behind the tree. His movement, almost simultaneous with Clancy's shot, was quick enough to save him. The ball passed through the skirt of his coat, without drawing blood, or even creasing his skin.

He sprang out again with a shout of triumph, his gun still cocked and ready.

Deliberately bringing the butt against his shoulder—for he was now sure of his victim—he said, in a derisive tone:

“You're a clumsy fellow, Clancy! A sorry marksman, to miss a man not six feet from the muzzle of your gun! I shan't miss you. Shot for shot's fair play. I've had the first, and I'll have the last. Now, take your death shot!”

As he said the words, a fiery jet streamed from his left-hand barrel.

For the moment Clancy was invisible, the sulphurous smoke forming a nimbus around him. When it ascended, he was seen prostrate upon the earth; the blood, welling from a wound in his breast, having already saturated his shirt!

He appeared to be writhing in his death agony.

He must have thought so himself, from the words that came through his lips, in slow, choking utterance:

“May God forgive you, Richard Darke—you have killed—murdered me!”

“I meant to do it,” was the un pitying response.

“Oh heavens!—wicked wretch—why—why—”

“Bah! You know the why, well enough. Helen Armstrong, if you like to hear it. After all, it wasn't that's made me kill you; but your impudence, thinking you had a chance with

her. You hadn't; she never cared a straw for you. Perhaps, before dying, it may be a consolation for you to know she never did. I've got the proof. Since it's not likely you'll ever see her again, it may give you a pleasure to look at her portrait. Here it is! The sweet girl sent it me this very morning, with her autograph attached, as you see. I think it an excellent likeness. What think you? You will, no doubt, give an unbiased opinion. One in your condition should speak candidly."

The ruffian held a photograph before the eyes of the dying man. They were growing dim; but only death could have dimmed them, so as not to see that sun-painted picture, the portrait of her he loved.

He gazed upon it lovingly, but not long. The script underneath claimed his attention. In it he recognized her handwriting known to him. The fear of death itself was naught to the despair that swept through his soul, as, with fast-flicking eyes he deciphered the words—

"Helen Armstrong.—For him she loves."

The picture was in the possession of Richard Darke. To Darke, then, had the words been addressed.

"The sweet creature!" repeated the latter, pouring the bitter speech into his victim's ear. "She sent it me this very morning. Come, Clancy! tell me what you think of the likeness?"

There was no response—neither by word, look, nor gesture. Clancy's lips were mute; his eyes glassed over; his body motionless as the mud on which it lay.

"D—n him, he's dead!"

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE CYPRESS.

"D—n him, he's dead!"

It was Richard Darke who gave utterance to the speech, blasphemous as brutal.

Profanity and brutality had been the characteristics of his life. To these he had now added a crime of deeper dye—murder.

And without remorse. As he bent over the lifeless form of his rival there was no resemblance of contrition, either in glance or gesture. On the contrary, his dark animal eyes were still sparkling with jealous hate, while his hand clutched the hilt of his bowie-knife. He had half drawn it from its sheath, as if to plunge it into the body. He saw it was already breathless—almost bloodless.

"What need? The man's dead."

And with this reflection, he pushed the blade back.

Now for the first time a thought of danger flashed across his brain. A sense of fear began to shape itself in his soul. For, beyond doubt, he had done murder!

"No!" he said, in an attempt at self-justification. "It's no murder. I've killed him, that's true; but he's had a shot at me. I can show that his gun is discharged, and here's his bullet-hole through the skirt of my coat. By thunder, it was a close shave!"

His eyes rested for a moment on the perforated skirt—only a moment. His uneasiness came back, and he continued to shape self-exuses.

"Bah! It was a fair fight. The thing happens every day in the streets. What difference whether it's among trees or houses? What difference—only that there were no witnesses? Well, what if there were none?"

The assassin stood reflecting—his glance now bent upon the body, now sent searchingly through the trees, as if afraid that some one might come along.

There was not much danger of this. The spot was one of perfect solitude, as is always a cypress forest. There was no path near, to be trodden by the wayfarer. The planter had no business among those great buttressed trunks. The woodman could never assail them with his ax. Only a stalking hunter, or perhaps some runaway slave, would be likely to stray thither.

Richard Darke soliloquized as follows:

"Shall I put a bold face upon it, and confess that I killed him? I can say we met while out hunting; that it's been a fair fight—shot for shot; my luck to have the last. Will that story stand?"

A pause in the soliloquy; a glance at the corpse; another that interrogated the surrounding scene, taking in the huge unshapely trunks, the long outstretched limbs, with their pall-like festoonery of Spanish moss; a thought about the loneliness of the place; its fitness for concealing a dead body; then a reflection as to the social status of the man he had murdered. All these passed through the mind of the murderer, diverting him from his half-formed resolution—admonishing him of its futility.

"It won't do," he went on, his words denoting the change. "No, that it won't! Better say nothing about him. He has no friends who'll inquire what's become of him; only his old mother. As for Helen Armstrong, will she—Ach!"

The ejaculation betrayed extreme acerbity of spirit, as if called up by the name. Strange, with such a sweet love-token lying along his breast!

He again glanced inquiringly round, this time with a view to secreting the corpse. He had made up his mind to do this.

A sluggish creek meandered among the trees, passing at some two hundred yards from the spot. At about a like distance below, it discharged itself into the stagnant reservoirs of the swamp.

Its waters were dark, from the overshadowing of the cypresses, and deep enough for such purpose as he was planning.

But to carry the body to it would require an effort of strength; and to drag it would leave traces.

In view of this difficulty, he said to himself:

"I'll let it stay where it is. No one ever comes this way; not likely. It may lie there till doomsday, or till the wolves and buzzards make bare bones of it. Then who can tell whose bones they are? Ah! better still, I'll throw some of this moss over it, and scatter more around. That will hide everything."

He rested his gun against a tree, and commenced dragging the beard-like parasite from the branches above. It came off in flakes—in armfuls. Half a dozen he flung over the still palpitating corpse; then pitched on the top some pieces of dead wood, lest a stray breeze might strip off the hoary shroud.

After strewing some tufts around, to conceal the blood and boot tracks, he stood for a time making survey of the scene.

At length satisfied, he again laid hold of his gun, and was about taking departure from the place, when a sound, falling upon his ear, caused him to start. Well was it calculated to do so: for it was as the voice of one wailing for the dead!

At first he was badly scared, but got over it on discovering the cause.

"Only the dog!" he said, as he saw Clancy's deerhound skulking among the trees.

On its master being shot down the animal had scampered off, perhaps fearing a similar fate. It had not gone far, and was now returning—little by little, drawing nearer to the spot.

The poor brute was struggling between two instincts—affection for its fallen master, and fear for its own life.

As Darke's gun was now empty, he tried to entice the creature within reach of his knife. With all his wheedling, it would not come.

Hastily ramming a cartridge into one of the barrels, he took aim at the animal, and fired.

The shot had effect; the ball passing through the fleshy part of the dog's neck. But only to crease the skin and draw out a spurt of blood. The animal, stung and still further affrighted, gave out a wild howl, and went off, without sign of stay or return.

Equally wild were the words that proceeded from the lips of the assassin, as he stood looking after. They were interrogative.

"The d—d cur 'll go home to the house? He'll tell a tale—perhaps guide people to the spot?"

As he spoke, the murderer turned pale. It was the first time he had experienced real fear. In such an out-of-the-way place he had felt safe about concealing the body, and along with it his bloody deed. Then, he had not taken the dog into account, and the odds were in his favor. But now, with the animal adrift, they were heavily against him.

It needed no calculation of chances to make this clear. Nor was it a doubt which caused him to stand hesitating. His irresolution came partly from affright, partly from uncertainty as to what course he should pursue.

One thing was certain—he could not stay there. The hound had gone off howling. It was two miles to the nearest plantation house; but there was an odd squatter's cabin and clearing between. A dog going in that guise, blood-bedraggled, and in full cry of distress, would be certain to raise an alarm. Equally certain to beget apprehensions for the safety of its missing master, and cause search to be made.

Richard Darke did not long stand thinking. Despite its solitude, it was not the place for tranquil thought—not for him. Far off through the trees he could hear the wail of the wounded Molossian. Was it fancy, or did he also hear men's voices?

He stayed not to ascertain. Beside that corpse, shrouded though it was, he dared not remain a moment longer.

Hastily shouldering his gun, he struck off through the forest; at first going in quick step; then in double; increasing to a run, impelled to this speed not by the howls of the hound, but the fancy that he heard human voices.

He retreated in a direction opposite to that taken by the dog. It was also opposite to the way leading to his father's house. It forced him still further into the swamp—across sloughs and through soft mud, where he made foot-marks. Though he had carefully concealed the body, and obliterated all other traces of the strife, in his "scare" he did not think of those he was now leaving.

The murderer is only cunning before the crime. After it, if he have conscience—or rather, having not courage and coolness—he loses self-possession, and is sure to leave clues for the detective.

So was it with Richard Darke. As he retreated from the scene of his diabolical deed, taking long strides, his only thought was to put space

between himself and that accursed crying cur. So he anathematized the animal, whose cries appeared commingling with the shouts of men—the voices of avengers!

CHAPTER VI.

A COON-CHASE INTERRUPTED.

THERE is no district in the Southern States without its noted coon-hunter. And, notably, the coon-hunter is a negro. The pastime is too tame, or too humble, to tempt the white man. Sometimes the sons of "poor white trash" take part in it; but it is usually delivered over to the "darkey."

In the old times of slavery, every plantation could boast of one or more of these sable Nimrods. To them coon-catching was a profit, as well as a sport; the skins keeping them in tobacco—and whisky, when addicted to drinking it. The flesh, too, though little esteemed by white palates, was a *bonne-bouche* to the negro, with whom flesh meat was a scarce commodity. It often furnished him with the means of making a savory roast.

The plantation of Ephraim Darke was no exception to the general rule. It, too, had its coon-hunter—a negro named, or nicknamed, "Blue Bill." The qualifying term came from a cerulean tinge, that in certain lights appeared upon the surface of his sable epidermis. Otherwise he was black as ebony.

Blue Bill was a mighty hunter of his kind, passionately fond of the coon-chase—too much, indeed, for his own safety and comfort. It carried him abroad, when the discipline of the plantation required him to be at home; and more than once, for so absenting himself, had his shoulders been scored by the lash.

All this had not cured him of his proclivity. Unluckily for Richard Darke, it had not. For on the evening of Clancy's being shot down, as described, Blue Bill was abroad; and, with a small cur which he had trained to his favorite chase, was ranging the woods near the edge of the cypress swamp.

He had "treed" an old he-coon; and was preparing to climb up to the creature's nest—a large knot-hole in a sycamore—when a shot startled him. He was more disturbed by the peculiar crack, than by the fact of its being the report of a gun. His ear, accustomed to the sound, knew it to have proceeded from the double-barrel belonging to his young master—just then the last man he would have wished to meet. He was away from the "quarter" without "pass" or permission of any kind.

His first thought was to continue his ascent of the sycamore, and conceal himself among its branches.

But his dog, still upon the ground—that would betray him?

While hurriedly reflecting on what he had best do, he heard a second shot. Then a third, coming quickly after; while mingling with the reports were men's voices, apparently in angry expostulation. He heard, too, the baying of a hound.

"Gorramity!" muttered Blue Bill; "dar's a skrimmage goin' on dar—a fight, I reck'n, to de def! And I know who dat fight's between. De fuss shot am Mass' Dick's gun; de oder am Mass' Charle Clancy. By golly! tain't safe dis child be see'd hya, nohow. Whar kin a hide maseff?"

Again he looked upward, scanning the sycamore; then down at his dog; and once more to the trunk of the tree. It was embraced by a creeper—a gigantic grape-vine—up which an ascent might easily be made; so easily that there need be no difficulty in the carrying his cur along with him. It was the ladder he had intended using to reach the treed coon. With the fear of his young master coming that way, and, if so, surely "cowhiding" him, he felt there was no time to be wasted in vacillation.

Nor did he waste any. Without further stay, he threw his arm around the coon-dog; raised the unresisting animal from the ground; and then "swarmed" up the creeper, like a she-bear carrying her cub.

In ten seconds after, he was ensconced in a crotch of the sycamore; safely screened from the observation of any one who might pass underneath, by the profuse clustering foliage of the parasite.

Feeling comparatively secure, he bent his ears more attentively to listen. He still heard two voices in conversation. Then only one of them, as if the other no longer replied. The one continuing to speak he could distinguish as that of his young master; though he could not make out the words spoken. The distance was too great, and the sound interrupted by the thick-standing trunks. It was a low monotone—might have been a soliloquy—and ended in an ejaculation. Even this he could only tell by its abrupt terminating tone.

Then succeeded a short interval of silence, as if both men had gone away. Blue Bill was in hopes they had, or that his young master might have done so. His hope was the stronger, that the tree in which he had secreted himself was not upon the way Richard Darke should take, returning to the plantation. It was night; and naturally he would be going home.

While thus reflecting, the coon-hunter's ear was again saluted by a sound. This time it was the hound that spoke—not barking as before, but in a low, lugubrious wail, a sort of whimper, which appeared to come from a direction different. Then again the voice of a man—Massa Dick's—who spoke as if coaxing the animal, and calling it up.

Another short interval of silence. Another shot, succeeded by an angry exclamation. Then the hound was heard in continuous howling, which gradually grew more indistinct, as if the animal was going off on the opposite side.

To the slave, absent without leave, all these sounds seemed ominous—indicative of some tragical occurrence. As he sat in the fork of the sycamore, listening to them, he trembled like an aspen leaf. Still, his presence of mind did not forsake him; and this was directed to keeping his own dog silent. Hearing the hound, the cur might give tongue in response—perhaps would have done so, but for the coon-hunter's fingers clasped chokingly round its throat, and only detached to give it an occasional cuff.

Once more stillness held possession of the forest. But again was it disturbed by the tread of footsteps, and a swishing among the underwood. Some one was passing through it, evidently making toward the tree where the coon-hunter was concealed.

More than ever Blue Bill trembled upon his perch; tighter than ever clutching the throat of his canine companion. For he felt sure the man, whose footsteps told of approach, was his master—or rather his master's son. They told also that he was advancing hastily; as if in retreat, rapid, headlong, confused. Upon this the peccant slave founded hopes of escaping observation, and consequent chastisement.

The sign did not disappoint him. In a few seconds after, he saw Richard Darke coming from the direction in which the shots and voices had been heard. He was running as for very life—the more like it, that he ran crouchingly, at intervals making stop, and standing to listen, with chin thrown back upon his shoulder!

When opposite the sycamore—almost under it—he made a pause longer than the others. The sweat appeared pouring down his cheeks, over his eyebrows, almost blinding him.

He drew a handkerchief from his coat-pocket; wiped it off; and then, replacing the kerchief, ran on again.

In doing this, he dropped something, unseen by himself. It did not escape the observation of the coon-hunter, conspicuously posted. The thing let fall resembled a letter, in an envelope.

This it proved to be, when Blue Bill, cautiously descending from the sycamore, approached the spot where it had fallen, and picked it up.

The coon-hunter could not read. No use his taking out the letter, though he saw that the envelope was open. But an instinct that it might, in some way or at some time, be useful, prompted him to put it in his pocket.

This done, he stood reflecting. There was now no sound to disturb him. The footsteps of Richard Darke were no longer heard. Their tread, gradually growing indistinct, had died away; the cypress forest resuming its pristine silence. The only sound the coon-hunter heard was the thumping of his own heart against his ribs—this loud enough.

No longer thought he of the coon he had succeeded in treening. The animal, late devoted to certain death, would owe its escape to an accident, and might now repose securely within its nest. Blue Bill had other thoughts—emotions strong enough to drive coon-hunting clean out of his head. Among them were apprehensions about his own safety. Though unseen by his young master—his presence even unsuspected—he knew that an unlucky chance had placed him in a position of danger. Of this his instinct had already warned him.

That a tragedy had been enacted, he not only surmised, but was pretty sure of.

Under the circumstances how was he to act? Go on to the place where he had heard the shots, and ascertain what had actually occurred?

At first he thought of doing this; but soon changed the intention. Frightened at what was already known to him, he dared not know more. His young master might be a murderer? The way in which he saw him retreating almost said he was. Was he, Blue Bill, to make himself acquainted with the crime, and bear witness against the man who had committed it? As a slave, he knew that his testimony would count for nothing in a court of justice. And as the slave of Ephraim Darke, he also knew his life would not be worth much after he had given it.

This last reflection decided him; and, still carrying the coon-dog under his arm, he parted from the spot, going in skulking gait, never stopping, never feeling safe, till he found himself within the limits of the "negro quarter."

Not then, till inside his own cabin, seated by the side of his Phoebe, his coon-dog smelling among the pots, and his "piccaninnies" clustering around, and clambering upon his knees.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ASSASSIN IN RETREAT.

ATHWART the thick timber, going as one pursued—in a track straight as the underwood al-

lows—at times breaking through it like a chased bear—now stumbling over a fallen log, or caught in a trailing grape-vine—Richard Darke flees from the place where he has laid his rival low.

He makes neither stop nor stay; if so, only for a few instants at a time, long enough to listen and try to discover whether he is followed.

Whether or not, he fancies it; again starting off, with terror in his looks and trembling in his limbs. The *sang-froid* he had exhibited while in the act of concealing the body has quite forsaken him now. Then he felt confident there could be no witness of the deed—nothing to connect him with it as the doer. It was the unthought-of presence of the dog that produced the change, or, rather, the thought of the animal having escaped. This, and his own frightened fancies; for he is now really in affright.

He keeps on for quite a mile in headlong, reckless rushing. Then, as fatigue overtakes him, his terror becomes less impulsive; his fancies freer from exaggeration; and, believing himself far enough from the scene of danger, he at length desists from flight.

He sits down upon a log, draws forth his pocket-handkerchief, and wipes the sweat from his face. He is panting, palpitating, perspiring at every pore. But he now finds time to reflect; and his first reflection is the absurdity of his precipitate retreat; his next, its imprudence.

"I've been a fool for it," he mutters. "Supposing some one had seen me? 'Twould only have made things worse.

"And what have I been running from? Only a hound, and nothing besides. Curse the dog! Let him go home, and be hanged! He can't tell a tale upon me. The scratch of a bullet—who could say what sort of ball, or what kind of gun it came from? No danger in that, and I've been stupid to think there could be.

"Well, it's all over now; and here I am. What next?"

For some minutes he remains upon the log, with the gun resting across his knees, and his head bent down between them. He appears engaged in some abstruse calculation. Something new is evidently before his mind—some scheme requiring all his power of thought to elaborate.

"I shall keep that tryst," he says, seeming at length to have settled it. "Yes; I shall meet her under the magnolia. Who can tell what changes may be brought about in the heart of a woman? In history I had a royal namesake—a king of England with a hump on his shoulders—as he's said himself, 'deformed, unfinished, sent into the world scarce half made up,' so that the 'dogs barked at him,' as this brute of Clancy's has been doing at me. And this royal Richard, shaped 'so lamely and unfashionable,' made court to her whose husband he had just assassinated—a proud Queen—wooded and subdued her! Surely, this should encourage me? The more that I, Richard Darke, am neither halt nor humpbacked. No, nor yet unfashionable, as many a pretty girl has said, and more than one sworn it.

"Proud, Helen Armstrong may be; proud as Queen Anne she is. For all that, I've got something may subdue her—a scheme as cunning as that of my royal namesake. May God, or the Devil, grant me a like success!"

At the moment of giving utterance to the profane prayer, he starts to his feet. Then, taking out his watch, consults it as to the time.

"Half-past nine it is now. Ten was the hour of appointment. There won't be time for me to go home, and then over to Armstrong's wood-ground. It's more than two miles from this. No matter about going home. There's no need to change my dress; she won't notice this tear in the skirt. If she should, she'd never think of what had caused it, much less it's being a bullet. She won't see it anyhow. I must be off. It will never do to keep a young lady waiting. If she don't feel disappointed at seeing me, bless her! If she do, I say curse her! What's passed prepares me for either event. In any case, I shall have satisfaction for the slight she's put upon me. By Judas I'll get that!"

He is stepping off when a thought occurs to him. He is not certain as to the exact hour of the tryst. He might be there too late. To make sure, he plunges his hand into the pocket, where he had deposited both letter and photograph, after holding the latter before the eyes of the dying man, and witnessing the fatal effect. With all his diabolical hardihood, he had been a little awed by this, and had thrust the papers into his pocket hastily, carelessly.

They are no longer there! Neither letter nor photograph can be found!

He tries the other pockets of his dress—all of them—with like result. He examines his bullet-pouch and game-bag. No letter, no cardboard, not a scrap of paper in either! The stolen epistle, its envelope, the inclosure, all are absent.

After once more ransacking his pockets, almost turning them inside out, he comes to the conclusion that the precious papers are lost.

It startles, and for a moment dismays him. Where is the missing epistle? He must have let it fall while retreating through the trees.

Shall he go back in search of it?

No; he will not. He does not dare to return

upon that track. The forest path is too somber, too solitary, now. By the margin of the dank lagoon, under the ghostly shadow of the cypresses, he might meet the ghost of Charles Clancy!

And why should he go back? After all, there is no need. What is there in the letter requiring him to regain possession of it? Nothing that can in any way compromise him. Why, then, should he care to recover it?

"Let the love-letter go to the devil, and the picture too! Let them rot where they've fallen—I suppose in the mud, or among the palmettoes. No matter for that. But it does matter, my being under the magnolia in good time. I must stay no longer here."

Obedient to the resolution thus formed, he re-buttons his coat, cast open in the search for the missing papers; throws his double-barrel—the murder-gun—over his shoulder; and strides off to keep an appointment not made for him, but for the man he has murdered!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COON-HUNTER AT HOME.

THERE was yet a lingering ray of daylight in the cleared ground of Ephraim Darke's plantation, as Blue Bill, returning from his interrupted chase, got back to the negro quarter. He had entered it, as already told, with stealthy tread, and looking cautiously around him.

For he knew that some of his fellow-slaves were aware of his having gone out "a-cooning," and would wonder at his early return—too early to pass without observation. If seen by them he might be asked for an explanation; which he was not prepared to give.

This it was that caused him to skulk in among the cabins; still carrying the dog under his arm, lest the latter might take a fancy to go scenting among the utensils of some other darkey's kitchen, and so betray his presence in the "quarter."

Fortunately for the coon-hunter, the little "shanty" that claimed him as its tenant stood at the outward extremity of the row of cabins—nearest the path leading to the plantation woodland. He was therefore enabled to reach, and re-enter it, without much danger of attracting observation.

And as it chanced, he was not observed; but got back into the bosom of his family, without any one being a bit the wiser.

Blue Bill's domestic circle consisted of his wife, Phoebe, and several half-naked little "niggers." Once more among them, however, he found he was still not safe, but had yet a gantlet to run. His re-appearance so soon, unexpected; his empty game-bag; the coon-dog under his arm; all had their effect upon Phoebe. She could not help having a surprise.

Nor did she submit to it in silence.

Confronting her dark-skinned lord and master, with arms set akimbo, she said:

"Bress de Lor', Bill! Wha' for you so soon home? Neider coon nor possum! An' de dog, toated after dat fashun! You ain't been a gone more'n a hour! Who'd speck see you come back dat-a way, emp'y-handed; nuffin, 'cep your own old dog! 'Splain it, Bill!"

The coon-hunter dropped his canine companion to the floor, and sat down upon a stool, but without giving the demanded explanation. He only said:

"Nebba mind, Phoebe gal; nebba you mind why I se home so soon. Dat's nuffin 'trange. I see'd de night warn't a gwine to be fav'ble fo' trackin' de coon; so dis nigga konklood ter leab ole coony lone."

"Lookkee hya, Bill!" said his wife, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and gazing earnestly into his eyes. "Dat 'ere ain't de correct expli-cashun. Yer ain't tellin' me de trooff!"

The coon-hunter quailed under the searching glance, as if in reality a criminal; but gave no response. He was at a loss what answer to make.

"Da's somethin' mysteerus 'bout dis," continued his better half. "You've got a seecrit, nigga; I kin tell it by de glint ob yer eye. I nebba see dat look on ye, but I know you ain't yaseff; jess as ye use deceive me, when you war in sich a way 'bout brown Bet."

"Wha' you talkin' 'bout, Phoebe? Dar's no brown Bet in de case. I swar dar ain't."

"Who sayed dar war? No, Bill, dat's all pass. I only spoked ob her 'kase yar look jess now like ye did when Bet used bamboozle ye. What I say now am dat you ain't yaseff. Dar's a cat in de bag, somewha; you better let her out, and confess de whole 'tory."

As Phoebe made this appeal, her glance rested searchingly upon her husband's face, and keenly scrutinized the play of his features.

There was not much play to be observed. The coon-hunter was a pure-blooded African, with features immobile as those of the Sphinx. And from his color naught could be deduced. As already said, it was the purity of its ebon blackness, producing a purplish iridescence over the epidermis, that had gained for him the sobriquet of "Blue Bill."

Unflinchingly he stood the inquisitorial glance; and for the time Phoebe was foiled.

Only until after supper, when the frugality of the meal—made so by the barren chase—had

perhaps something to do in melting his heart, and relaxing his tongue. Whether this, or whatever the cause, certain it is, that before going to bed, he unburdened himself to the partner of his joys, by making full confession of what he had witnessed on the swamp edge.

He told her, also, of the letter he had picked up; which, cautiously pulling out of his pocket, he handed over for her inspection.

Phoebe had once been a family servant—an indoor domestic and handmaiden to a white mistress. This was in the days of youth—the halcyon days of girlhood, in “Ole Varginny”—before she had been transported west, sold to Ephraim Darke, and by him degraded to the lot of an ordinary outdoor slave. But her original owner had taught her to “read,” and her memory still retained a trace of this early education—sufficient for her to decipher the script she now held in her hands.

She first looked at the photograph; as it came first out of the envelope. There could be no mistaking whose portrait it was. Helen Arm-

land, when I war out a coon-huntin’? More’n once I see’d em. A young white lady an’ genl’m don’t meet dat way unless dar’s a feelin’ atween ‘em, any more dan we poor brack folks. Besides, dis nigga know dey lub one ‘noder—he know fo’ satin. Jule, she tell Jupe; and Jupe hab trussed dat same seecret to me. Dey been in lub long time; afore Mass’ Charl’ went ‘way to Texas. But de great Kurnel Armstrong, he don’t know nuffin’ ‘bout it. Golly! ef he did, he shoo kill Charl’ Clancy; dat is, if de poor young man ain’t dead arready. Le’s hope ‘tain’t so. But, Phoebe, gal, open dat letter, an’ see what de young lady say. Satin it’s been wrote by her. Maybe it t’row some light on dis dark subjeck.”

Phoebe, thus requested, took the letter out of the envelope. Then spreading it out and holding it close to the flare of the tallow dip, read it from beginning to end.

It took considerable time; as her scholastic acquirements, not very bright at best, had become dimmed by long disuse. For all, she succeeded in deciphering and interpreting every

promise to keep dark, for de case am a desprit one.”

Phoebe could well comprehend the caution; and promising compliance, the two went to sleep by the side of their sable offspring, resolved on preserving silence.

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER THE MAGNOLIA.

PERHAPS for the first time in her life, Helen Armstrong walked with stealthy step, and crouchingly. Daughter of a large slave-owner—mistress over many slaves—she was accustomed to an upright attitude and aristocratic bearing. But she was now on an errand that required more than ordinary caution, and would dread recognition by the humblest slave on her father’s estate.

Cloaked and hooded—the hood drawn well over her face—with body bent, as she moved silently forward, it would have taken a sharp darkey to identify her as his young mistress—



FACING TOWARD THE TREE, AND STANDING ON TIPTOE, SHE RAISES HER HAND ALOFT, AND COMMENCES GROPING AGAINST THE TRUNK.—Page 8.

strong was too conspicuously beautiful to have escaped the notice of the humblest slave in the settlement. Too good, also; for, as a friend to the black folks, she was known to them throughout the whole line of riverine plantations.

The negress spent some minutes gazing upon the fair face, as she did so, remarking:

“How bewful am dat young lady! What by she gwine away from de place!”

“You am right ‘bout dat, Phoebe. She bewful as any white gal dis nigga ebber sot eyes on. And she good as bewful. I’s sorry she gwine ‘way from dese parts. How many a darkie ‘ll miss dat dear young lady. An’ won’t Mass’ Charl’ Clancy miss her too? Lor! I most forgot; maybe he no trouble ‘bout her now; maybe he’s gone dead! Ef dat so, she miss him, an’ no mistake. She cry her eyes out, shoo-sartin.”

“You t’ink dar war somet’ing ‘tween dem two?”

“T’ink! I’s shoo ob dat, Phoebe. Didn’t I see dem boaf togedder down dar in de wood-

item of its contents to the coon-hunter; who sat listening with eyes in wonderment, and ears wide open.

When finished, and the letter, along with the photograph, was replaced in the envelope, the two were for some time silent, pondering upon the circumstances thus revealed to them.

Blue Bill was the first to resume speech. He said:

“Dar’s a good deal in dat letter I know’d afore, and dar’s odder points as ‘pear to be new to me; but whether de old or de new, ‘twon’t do for you or me to declar’ a single word o’ what de young lady hab say. No, Phoebe, neery word must ‘scape de lips ob eider o’ us. We muss hide de letter, an’ neber let nobdy know dar’s sich a dockyment in our poseshun. And dar must be nuffin’ sayed or know’d ‘bout dis nigga findin’ it. Ef dat ebber kum out, den I needn’t tell you what ‘ud happen to us. We’d boaf catch de cow-hide, an’ maybe de punishment ob de pump. So, Phoebe, gal, gi’e me yar

the eldest daughter of his “Massa,” Colonel Armstrong—more especially as it was after night she was thus cautiously proceeding, and under the shadow of trees.

Notwithstanding the obscurity, she was keeping in a direct course, as if making for some point, and with a purpose.

Does it need to be told what this purpose was? Love alone could tempt a young lady out at that hour; and only love not allowed—perhaps forbidden, by some one having ascendancy over her. Only this could account for her making her way through the wood in such secret guise.

At the same hour and moment Colonel Armstrong was at work, with all his household, white retainers as well as black slaves. Of the last there were not many left him—Ephraim Darke having foreclosed the mortgage, and obtained possession of the estate, made over to him by private sale. Three or four field-hands, and some half-dozen house servants—whose affection made them almost members of his

family—were all that remained to the ruined planter.

He was about to move off with these, to make the beginning of a new home in Texas; and the next morning was appointed for starting. At an early hour, too; so that the night was being given to the final settlement of affairs and preparation for the journey. Thus, fully occupied, chiefly with out-door matters, he had no time to give to his family. His two daughters he supposed to be equally engrossed with those cares, on such occasions, left to the female members of the household.

Had the proud planter—still proud, though now in comparative poverty—had he at that moment been told that his eldest born was abroad in the woods, it would have startled him. Further informed as to her errand—the keeping of a love appointment—it would have caused him to desist from his preparations for travel—perhaps thrown him into a terrible rage. And, still better acquainted with the circumstances—told who was the man thus favored with a nocturnal assignation, and that it was his own daughter, his eldest, the pride of his house and heart, who had made it—it is just possible he would have dropped whatever duty he was engaged upon, sprung to his pistols, and rushed off to the woods, on the track of his straying child, there, perhaps, to enact a tragedy sanguinary as the one recounted, if not so repulsive.

Fortunately, he had no knowledge of aught that was passing. Engrossed in the cares of the night—the last he was to spend on his old plantation—thinking only of preparations for the new home—he had no suspicion of Helen being absent from the house. He saw Jessie there; and she, her sister's *confidante*—both as to the absence and its cause—took pains to conceal both.

Still stooping in her gait—casting furtive interrogatory glances to right, to left, forward, and behind—at intervals stopping to listen—Helen Armstrong continues on in her nocturnal excursion.

She has not far to go—half a mile or so from the house. On the edge of the cultivated ground, where the primeval forest meets the maize-field, stands a grand magnolia, that has been respected by the woodman's ax. This is to be the trysting-tree. She knows it—she has herself named it. It is the same tree in the knot-hole of which her trusted maid "Jule" had deposited the letter containing her photograph.

As she comes to a stop under its spreading branches, she throws open her cloak, tosses the hood back, and stands with uncovered face.

She has no fear now. The place is beyond the range of night-strolling negroes. Only one in pursuit of 'possum, or 'coon, would be likely to come that way. But this is a contingency too rare to give her uneasiness.

With features set in expectation, she stands under the tree—within the darkness of its shadow. Alone the fireflies illuminate her face; though it is one deserving a better light. But seen, even under the pale, fitful coruscation of the "lightning bugs,"—so coarsely, as inappropriately, named—its beauty is beyond cavil or question. Black hair, black eyes and eyebrows, complexion of golden brown, features of gipsy type—to which the hooded cloak adds characteristic expression—all combine in forming a picture appropriate to its framing, the forest.

Only for a few short moments does she remain motionless. Just long enough to get back her breath, spent by some exertion in making her way through the wood—more difficult in the darkness. Strong emotions, too, contribute to the quick-beating heart.

She does not wait for it to be stilled. Facing toward the tree, and standing on tiptoe, she raises her hand aloft, and commences groping against the trunk. The fireflies gleam on her slender snow-white fingers, as these stray along the bark; at length resting upon the edge of a dark disk—a knot-hole in the tree. Into this her hand is plunged, and after a moment drawn out—empty!

At first there is no appearance of disappointment. On the contrary, the phosphoric gleam dimly lighting up her features, rather shows satisfaction—still further evinced in the phrase that falls from her lips, with the tone of its utterance. She says, contentedly:—

"He has got it!"

By the same fitful light, soon after can be perceived a change—the slightest expression of chagrin, as she adds, in murmured interrogation:

"Why has he not left an answer?"

Is she sure he has not? No. But she soon will be.

With this determination, she again faces toward the tree; once more inserts her slender jeweled fingers; plunges in her white hand, to the wrist; gropes the cavity all round; then draws the hand out again, this time with an exclamation stronger than disappointment. The tone is of discontent—almost anger.

"He might at least have let me know whether he was coming or not—a word to say that I might expect him. He should have been here before me! I am certain it is the hour—past it!"

She is not so. It is but a conjecture; and in this she may be mistaken—perhaps wronging him. To make certain, she draws the watch from her waistbelt; steps out into the moonlight; and holds the dial close to her eyes. The gold glances bright, and the jewels flash joyfully under the moonbeams. But there is no joy in Helen Armstrong's face. On the contrary, a mixed expression of sadness and chagrin. For the hands of the watch point to ten minutes after the hour she had named in her letter.

There can be no mistake about the time—she had herself appointed it. And none in the time-piece. She has full confidence in her watch; it is not a cheap one.

"Ten minutes after, and he not here! No answer to my note! He must certainly have received it. Jule put it into the tree; she assured me of that on her return. Who but he could have taken it out? No one is likely to know of it. Oh! this is cruel! He comes not—I shall go home."

The cloak is once more closed around her; the hood drawn over her head.

Still she lingers—lingers and listens.

No footstep; no sound to break the stillness of the night; only the chirrup of tree-crickets, and the shrieking of owls.

She takes a last look at her watch—sadly, despairingly. It shows fifteen minutes after the appointed hour—nearer twenty! She restores it to its place, with an air of determination. Sadness, despair, chagrin—all three disappear from her countenance. Anger is now its expression, fixed and stern. The coruscation of the firefly has a response in flashes less pale than its own phosphorescence—sparks from the eyes of an indignant woman! Helen Armstrong is surely this; as, closely drawing her cloak around her, she turns away from the tree.

She has not passed beyond the shadow of its branches, ere her steps are stayed. A rustling of fallen leaves—a swishing among those that still adhere to their branches—a footfall with tread solid and heavy—the footfall of a man! The figure of one is seen; indistinctly at first, but surely a man.

"He has been detained by some good cause," she joyfully reflects; her sadness and spite both departing, as he appears drawing nigh.

They are gone as he stands by her side.

But, womanlike, determined to make a grace of forgiveness, she begins by upbraiding him.

"You are here at last, sir! Well, I wonder you came at all. There's an old adage, 'Better late than never.' Perhaps you think it fitting? Speaking of myself, you may be mistaken. Never mind! Whether or not, I've been here long enough, alone. And the hour is too late for me to stay any longer. So good-night, sir—good night!"

Her speeches are spiteful in tone, and bitter in sense. She intends them to be both.

While giving utterance to them, she has drawn the hood over her head, and is moving off—as if determined to give a lesson to the lover who has slighted her.

Seeing this, he throws himself in front, interrupting her steps. Despite the darkness, she can perceive that his arms are in the air, and stretched toward her appealingly. The attitude speaks apology, regret, contrition—everything to make her relent.

She relents; is ready to fling herself, forgivingly, on his breast. But not without one more word of upbraiding.

"'Tis cruel thus to have tried me. Oh! Charles! Charles! why have you done so?"

"Helen Armstrong, my name is not Charles, but Richard. I am Richard Darke!"

CHAPTER X.

THE WRONG MAN.

RICHARD DARKE instead of Charles Clancy! Disappointment! This would be too tame a word to express the pang that shot through the heart of Helen Armstrong, on discovering the mistake she had made. It was bitter vexation, with a commingling of shame. For her words, though spoken in reproach, had terribly compromised her.

She did not sink to the earth, nor yet show signs of fainting. She was not a woman of this way. No cry came from her lips—nothing that could betray surprise, or even ordinary emotion.

As Darke stood before her with arms upraised, right in her path, she simply said:

"Well, sir; if you are Richard Darke, what then? Your being so does not give you any right to intrude upon me. I wish to be alone."

The cool, firm tone caused him to quail. He had hoped that the surprise of his unexpected appearance—coupled with his knowledge of her clandestine appointment—would have done something to subdue, perhaps make her submissive.

On the contrary, the thought of this last but stung her to resentment, and he soon saw it. His arms came down; and he was about stepping aside and leaving her free to pass; though not without making an attempt to justify himself. He did so, saying:

"If I've intruded upon you, Miss Armstrong, I am sorry for it. It has been altogether an accident, I assure you. Having heard you were

about to leave the neighborhood—indeed, that you start to-morrow morning—I was going over to your father's house to say farewell. I am sorry that my coming this way, and chancing to meet you, should lay me open to the charge of intrusion. I shall still more regret if it has interfered with an appointment. Some one else expected, I suppose?"

For a time she was silent—abashed by the impudent interrogatory.

Recovering herself, she said:

"And even so, what gives you the right to question me? I have told you I wish to be alone."

"Oh, if it's your wish, I shall at once relieve you of my presence."

He stepped to one side in saying so. Then continued:

"As I've said, I am on the way to your father's house to take leave of the family. If you are not going immediately home, perhaps I may be the bearer of a message for you?"

The irony was evident; but Helen Armstrong was not thinking of this. Only how she could get disembarassed of this man who had appeared at a moment so *mal-a-propos*. Charles Clancy—for he was the expected one—might have been detained by some cause unknown, a delay still possible of justification. She had a lingering hope he might yet come, and her eye interrogated the forest with a quick, subtle glance.

Notwithstanding its subtlety, notwithstanding the obscurity surrounding them, Darke saw it—understood it.

Without waiting for a rejoinder, he proceeded to say:

"From the mistake you have just made, Miss Armstrong, I presume you took me for some one bearing the baptismal name of Charles. In these parts I know only one person who carries that cognomen—Charles Clancy. If it be he you are expecting, I think I can save you the necessity of staying out in the night air any longer; that is, if you are staying for him. He will certainly not come."

"What mean you, Mr. Darke? Why do you say that?"

The disappointing speech had made its impression, and thrown the proud girl off her guard. She spoke confusedly, and without reflection.

Darke's rejoinder was more cunning; a studied one.

"Because I met Charles Clancy this morning, and he told me he was going off on a journey. He was just starting when I saw him. Some affair of the heart, I believe; a little love-scape he's got into with a pretty Creole who lives in Natchez. By-the-way, he showed me a photograph of yourself, which he said he had just received. A very excellent likeness, I call it. Excuse me for telling you, that Clancy and I came near quarreling about that picture. He had another photograph, that of his Creole *chere-amie*, and would insist that she is more beautiful than you. It is true, Miss Armstrong, that you've given me no great reason to be your champion. Still, I couldn't stand that; and, after questioning Clancy's taste, I plainly told him he was mistaken. I'm ready to repeat the same to him, or any one who says you are not the most beautiful woman in the State of Mississippi."

At the conclusion of the fulsome speech Helen Armstrong cared but little for his championship, and not much for anything else.

Her heart was nigh to breaking. She had given her affections to Charles Clancy—in her letter late written she had lavished them.

And they had been trifled with—scorned. She was slighted for a Creole girl! There was full proof, or how could Darke have known of it? More maddening still, Clancy had been making boast of her supplianee and shame, showing her photograph, and proclaiming the triumph he had obtained! Oh God!

This was the ejaculation that escaped from Helen Armstrong's lips, as the bitter thoughts swept through her soul. Along with it came a half-suppressed scream, as, despairingly, she turned her face homeward.

Darke saw his opportunity, or thought so; and again flung himself before her.

"Helen Armstrong!" he cried, in the earnestness of passion—a passion, if not pure, at least heartfelt and strong—"why should you care for a man who thus mocks you? Here am I, who love you truly—madly—more than my own life! It's not too late to withdraw the answer you have given me. Gainsay it now, and there will be no need for any change—any going to Texas. Your father's home may still be his, and yours. Say you will be my wife, and everything shall be restored to him—all will be well."

She listened for the conclusion of the speech. Its appealing sincerity stayed her, though she could not tell, or did not think, why. It was a moment of mechanical irresolution.

But, soon as it was ended, again came back into her soul, the bitterness that had just swept through it.

And there was no balm in the words spoken by Richard Darke; on the contrary, his speech was like pouring in fresh poison.

To his appeal she made answer, as once before she had answered him—with but a single word. It was repeated three times, and in a tone not

to be mistaken. On speaking it, she parted from the spot; her proud, haughty step, with a denying if not disdainful gesture, telling him, she was not to be further accosted.

Spited, chagrined, angry as he was, in his craven heart he felt cowed and fearful. He dared not follow her, but remained under the tree, from whose hollow trunk still seemed to reverberate her last word, thrice emphatically pronounced:

"Never—never—never!"

CHAPTER XI.

"WHY COMES HE NOT?"

If, on that night, Helen Armstrong went to bed reflecting bitterly of Charles Clancy, there was another woman, who sat up, thinking sadly about him.

Some two miles from the gate of Colonel Armstrong's plantation, near the road that led past the latter, stood a house, of humble aspect compared with the dwelling of the planter. It

scribed as being sad. He was her son—her only child, and she his only living parent.

As already known, her widowhood was of recent date. She still wore its emblems upon her person, and carried its sorrow in her heart.

Her husband, of good Irish lineage, had found his way to Nashville, the capital city of Tennessee; where, in times long past, many Irish families had made settlement. It was there he had married her, she herself being a native Tennessean, sprung from the old Carolina pioneer stock, that had gone into the country near the end of the eighteenth century, along with the Robertsons, Hyneses, Hardings, and Bradfords, leaving to their descendants a certain patent of nobility, or at least a family name deserving, and generally obtaining, respect.

In America, as elsewhere, it is not the rule for Irishmen to grow rich; and still more exceptional in the case of an Irish gentleman. When these have riches their hospitality is too apt to take the shape of spendthrift profuseness, ending in pecuniary embarrassment.

loved mother, whose grief, pressing heavily, had almost brought her to the grave. It was one of a long series of reverses which had sorely taxed her fortitude. Another might end her life.

Some such presentiment was in her mind, on that very day as the sun went down, and she sat beside a dim candle, her ear keenly bent to listen for the returning footsteps of her son.

He had been absent since noon. He had gone out deer-stalking, so he had told her. She could spare him for this, and pardon a prolonged absence. She knew he was devoted to the chase; he had been so from a boy; but more than ever since his trip to Texas, where he had imbibed a passion for it—or, rather, cultivated that instinctive to him. While in Texas he had made an expedition to the furthest frontier, and there hunted buffalo and grizzly bear, with trappers and Indians for his companions. Thus inoculated, a man rarely gets over his penchant for the pursuit sanctified by St. Hubert. His mother, knowing this, would have thought nothing of his staying out a little late.



WHY STAND WITH PALLOR UPON HIS CHEEKS, TEETH CHATTERING, AS IF AN AGUE CHILL HAD SUDDENLY ATTACKED HIM?—Page 11.

might have been called a cottage; but the name is scarcely known in the State of Mississippi. Nor yet was it either log-cabin, or "shanty," but a frame-house, with walls of "weather boarding," planed and painted, the roof being of "shingles." It was a class of dwelling occasionally seen in the Southern States—though not so frequently as in the Northern—inhabited by men in moderate circumstances, poorer than planters, but richer or more genteel than the "white trash," who live in log-cabins.

Planters they are in social rank, though poor; perhaps owning three or four slaves, and cultivating a small holding of land, from twenty to fifty acres. A frame-house vouches for their respectability, while two or three log structures at the back, representing barn, stable, and other out-buildings, tell of there being land attached.

Of this class was the habitation spoken of as standing two miles from the gate of the Armstrong plantation. It was the home of Charles Clancy; and inside it was the woman whose thoughts about him on that night we have de-

It was so with Captain Jack Clancy, who got wealth with his wife, but soon squandered it upon his own and his wife's friends. The result was a move to Mississippi, where land was at the time cheaper, and where his attenuated fortune enabled him to hold out a little longer.

Still the property he had purchased in Mississippi State was but a poor one; and he was contemplating a further flit into the rich "red lands" of North Eastern Texas, then becoming famous as a field for colonization. As said, his son Charles had been sent thither on a trip of exploration; spent twelve months upon the frontier prospecting for their new home; and returned with a report in every way favorable.

But the ear into which it was to have been spoken could no more hear. Before his return, Captain Clancy was in his coffin; and to the only son there remained only a mother.

This was several weeks antecedent to the tragedy, whose details are already before the reader. Charles had passed the intervening time in endeavoring to console his dearly-be-

But on the present occasion he was beyond the usual time. It was now night; the deer must have sought their coverts; and he had not gone "torch-hunting."

Only one thing could she think of that might explain the tardiness of his return. The eyes of the mother had been of late watchful and wary. She had noticed her son's abstracted air, and heard sighs that seemed to come from his inner heart. Who could mistake the signs of love, either in man or woman? Mrs. Clancy could not, and did not. She saw that her son had fallen into this condition.

Rumors that seemed wafted on the air—signs slight, but significant—perhaps the whisper of a confidential servant—these had given her assurance of the fact: telling her, at the same time, who had won his affections—Helen Armstrong.

The mother was not displeased. In all the neighborhood there was no woman she would have more wished for her daughter-in-law than this young lady. Not from any thought of her remarkable beauty, or high social standing.

Caroline Clancy was herself too well descended to make much of the latter circumstance. It was the reputed noble character of the lady that influenced her approval of her son's choice.

Thinking of this—remembering her own youth and the stolen interviews with Charles Clancy's father—often under the shadows of night—she could not reflect harshly on the absence of that father's son from his home, however late the hour.

It was only when the clock struck twelve, she began to think seriously about it. Then came over her a feeling of uneasiness, soon changing to apprehension. Why should he be staying out so late—after midnight? The same little bird, that brought her tidings of her son's love affair, had also told her it was clandestine. Mrs. Clancy might not have liked this. It had the semblance of a slight to them, the Clancys, in their reduced circumstances. But then, to satisfy her, came up the retrospect of her own days of courtship.

Still, at that hour the young lady could not—dared not—be abroad. All the more unlikely that the Armstrongs were going away—as all the neighborhood knew—and intended starting early the next morning.

Colonel Armstrong's household would long since have retired to rest; and an interview with his daughter could not be the cause of Charles Clancy's detention. Something else must be keeping him. What?

Thus ran the reflections of the fond mother. At intervals she started from her seat, as some sound reached her from without; each time gliding to the door and looking out—only to return to her room disappointed.

For long spells she stood in the porch, her eye interrogating the road that ran past the cottage, her ear keenly listening for footsteps.

There was a brilliant moonlight. But no man, no form moving underneath it. No sound of coming feet—only dead stillness, saving the nocturnal voices of the forest—the chirp of tree-crickets, the gluck-gluck of frogs, and the shrieking of owls. But among them no sound bearing resemblance to a footfall.

One o'clock, and still silence, or the same monotone of animal sounds; to the mother of Charles Clancy now become terribly oppressive, as with keen apprehension she watched for his return.

At short intervals she glanced at the little "Connecticut" clock that ticked over the mantel. A peddler's thing, it might be false, as the men who came south selling them. It was the reflection of a southern woman, and she hoped her conjecture might be true.

But, as she lingered in the porch, and looked at the waning moon, she knew it must be late—quite two o'clock. And still no fall of footsteps—no son returning.

"Where, where, is my Charles? What can be detaining him?"

Phrases almost identical with those that had fallen from the lips of Helen Armstrong but a few hours before! The place only unlike, and the words prompted by a different passion, though one equally strong and pure.

Both doomed to disappointment alike hard to bear. Alike in cause, and yet how dissimilar the impression produced! The sweetheart believing herself slighted, forsaken, left without a lover; the mother tortured with the presentiment she no longer had a son!

When, at an hour between midnight and morning, a dog, his coat clotted with mud, came crawling through the gate, and Mrs. Clancy recognized her son's favorite hunting hound, she could still only have suspicion of the terrible truth. But it was a suspicion that, to the mother's heart, already filled with foreboding, felt like certainty. Too much for her strength. Wearied and worn with watching, prostrated by the intensity of her vigil, when the hound crawled up the steps of the porch and under the dim light she saw his bedraggled form—blood as well as mud upon it—the sight produced a climax, a shock nearly fatal.

Mrs. Clancy swooned upon the spot, and was carried inside the house by a faithful negro slave—the last that was left to her.

CHAPTER XII.

A LAST LOOK AT LOVED SCENES.

LONG before the hour of daybreak on that same morning, a light wagon, loaded with luggage and other personal effects, passed out from the gate of what had lately been Archibald Armstrong's plantation.

It was his no more. The mortgage had been foreclosed, and Ephraim Darke was now its owner.

Close following the baggage-wagon was a carriage of lighter construction, the old family barouche, inside which were seated Colonel Armstrong and his two daughters. They were all of family he had; and it was the last time they were ever to ride in that carriage, either for airing or journey.

It was a journey on which they were now bent; not a very long one by carriage—only to Natchez; whence a steamboat would convey them, along with other passengers, up the Red River of Louisiana.

The boat was not to start before daybreak; but there were some miles, and much rough road, between the plantation and the town of Natchez; hence the early hour of removal from a house never more to be their home.

Colonel Armstrong had chosen the boat, as the time of departure, for a special reason. Feeling himself a bankrupt, broken man, he did not desire to be seen leaving his old home under the glaring light of day. Not that he had any fear of being detained. He had satisfied all legal claims, and had still something left—enough to give to him a handsome start in Texas. He had converted it into cash; which will account for the accompaniment of only a single wagon, loaded with personal effects, and some endeared objects—such as compose the household gods of every old family. Half a dozen male and female slaves—Jule among the latter—were part of the retained chattels. His early start was due to a feeling of sensitiveness, not shame. He shrunk from being stared at in his hour of humiliation.

By the light of a southern moon, the two vehicles, transporting him and his, rumbled along the road, or sunk into its ruts; at length, entering the quaint old city of Natchez; which stands upon one of those very rare projections that surmount the Mississippi river, known as the "Chicasaw Bluffs."

It was still not quite day when he and his belongings, after slowly crawling down the steep hill that leads to the river landing, got aboard the boat; and only just sunrise as the steamer's bell, tolling for the third time, proclaimed the signal of departure.

Soon after, Colonel Armstrong and his two daughters, standing upon the "guards" outside the ladies' cabin, looked their last on the city of Natchez; in the best society of which they had for many years mingled, and where the eldest had reigned supreme. It was no thought of parting from this pleasant ascendancy—no thought of exchanging her late luxurious life for the log cabin and poverty her father had promised her—that brought the tear into Helen Armstrong's eye. She could have borne all these, and far more—ay, looked forward to them with cheerfulness—had Charles Clancy been true.

He had not, and that was an end of it.

Was it?

No; not for her, though it might be for him. In the company of his new sweetheart, the Creole girl of whom Dick Darke had given her the first information—for Helen Armstrong had never heard of her before—he would soon forget the vows he had made, and the sweet words spoken under the magnolia; a tree that, in retrospect, seemed now to her sadder than any cypress.

Would she ever forget him? Could she? No, not unless in Texas, whither she was going, there should be found the fabled Lethean stream. She thought not of this. If she had, it would not have been with faith in the efficacy of its waters. There was no water on earth, nor spirit, that could give either oblivion, or solace to the thoughts that tortured her.

Perhaps not less sad, though very different, would they have been if she had but known the truth. If, instead of making that early start from the old plantation home, her father had waited for daybreak, all would have been different—all that affected her happiness. Had the carriage Colonel Armstrong and his daughters but rolled along the road when the sun was shining upon it, they would have heard tidings—a tale to thrill all three, but more especially herself. With her it would have penetrated to the heart's inmost core, displacing the bitterness there already lodged by one also galling, though unlike in nature. Perhaps it might have been easier to endure? Perhaps Helen Armstrong would rather have believed Charles Clancy dead, than think of his traitorous defection?

Which of the two calamities she would have preferred—preferring neither—there could be no opportunity of testing. Long before it was known that Clancy had been killed—before the hue and cry was raised, resounding through the settlement—the boat on which the Armstrongs were embarked had steamed far away from the scene of the tragedy.

Little thought Helen, as she stood on the stern-guard, looking back with tearful eyes, that the man making her weep was at that moment a corpse, lying cold under shadowy cypresses.

Had she known it, she would have been shedding tears—not of spite, but sorrow.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE CORPSE?

THE sun was up—high up over the tops of the tallest forest trees. Around the residence of widow Clancy a crowd had collected. They were mostly men, with an admixture of boys, half-grown youths, and women. They were her nearest neighbors; while those who dwelt at a greater distance were still in the act of assembling. Every few minutes two or three horsemen were seen riding up, carrying long rifles over their shoulders, with powder-horns and bullet-pouches strapped across their breasts.

Those already on the ground were similarly armed and accoutered.

The cause of this warlike muster was known to all. That morning at an early hour, a report had been spread throughout the plantations, that Charles Clancy was missing from his home, under circumstances that justified a suspicion of foul play having befallen him. His mother had sent messengers to and fro; and this had brought the gathering around her house.

In the South-Western States, on occasions of this kind, it does not do for any one to show indifference, whatever be his station in life. The proudest or wealthiest planter, as well as the poorest white, is expected to take part in the administration of backwoods justice—sometimes not strictly *en regle* with the laws of the land.

For this reason every neighbor, far and near, summoned or not summoned, is pretty sure to be present; as they were on this occasion. Among the rest Ephraim Darke and his son Richard.

When all, or nearly all, had got upon the ground, the business that brought them together was discussed. It was to search for Charles Clancy, still absent from his home. The mother's story had been already told, and only the late comers had to hear it again. Her son had gone out deer-hunting, as often, almost every day, before. He had taken his favorite hound with him. She knew not in what direction he had gone. It had never been her habit to inquire which way he went on his hunting expeditions. Enough for her that he came home again; which, until that day, he had always done before the going down of the sun. He had never before stayed out after night. He new she was alone; and, being a good son, always returned within the twilight, if not sooner. Having failed to do so on the night before, she naturally felt uneasy. At a later hour her uneasiness became alarm. Later still, she was in a state of agonized apprehension; which came to its climax when, in the gray light of morning, the dog came skulking home, his coat covered with mud, and blood upon it.

The animal was before their eyes, still in the condition spoken of. They could all see it had been shot—the tear of a bullet was visible upon its neck, having cut through the skin. Besides, there was a piece of cord knotted around the dog's throat, the other end showing as if it had been first gnawed by the animal's teeth, and then broken off as with a pluck.

All these circumstances had a significance; though no one could explain or even offer a conjecture as to their meaning. It looked as if the animal had been tied—perhaps to a tree—and afterward succeeded in setting itself loose.

But why tied? And why had it been shot? These were the questions that not anybody could answer.

Strange, too, in the hound having reached home at the hour it did! Its missing master was never abroad after sunset—so Mrs. Clancy assured them. If anything had happened to him before that hour—anything to separate him from the dog and keep him back—why had the latter delayed returning home? As Clancy had gone out about the middle of the day, he could not have proceeded to such a distance from the house for his hound to have been nearly all night in getting back to it.

Was it he himself who fired the bullet whose mark was made upon the dog? This was also a point in the preliminary investigation.

Not for long. The question was soon answered. There were old backwoodsmen among the mustered crowd—hunters who knew how to interpret a "sign" as exactly as would Champollion an Egyptian hieroglyph. These having examined the score on the hound's skin, pronounced the bullet to have come from a *smooth-bore*, and *not a rifle*. It was known that Charles Clancy never hunted with a smooth-bore, but always with a rifle.

This was a point of very important character, and did not fail to make impression on the minds of the assembled backwoodsmen.

After some time spent in discussing what was best to be done, it was at length agreed to institute a search for the missing man. In the presence of his mother no one spoke of searching for his *body*; though there was a general apprehension that this would be the end of it.

She, most interested of all, had a too true foreboding of it. When her neighbors, starting out, told her to be of good cheer, her heart more truly said to her, she would never see her son again.

On leaving the house the searchers separated into three distinct parties, intending to take different directions; which they did.

With one of these, and the largest, went the dog; an old hunter, named Simeon Woodley, conducting it. It was thought that the animal might be in some way useful, if taken back on his tracks—supposing that these could be discovered. Along with this party went Richard Darke, his father choosing to accompany another.

Just as had been conjectured, the dog did prove useful. Once inside the woods, without even setting snout to the ground, he started off upon a straight run—going so swiftly that it

was difficult for the horsemen to keep up with him.

It put them all into a gallop, continued for miles through woodland, to the edge of the swamp. Here it ended, by their all pulling up under a tree—a great buttressed cypress, by the side of which the staghound had made a stop, and commenced a lugubrious baying.

The searchers, having ridden up, dismounted, and gathered around the spot; many of them expecting to see the dead body of Charles Clancy.

But there was no body there—dead or alive. Only a large pile of Spanish moss, that appeared to have been recently torn from the branches above. It looked as though it had been first collected into a heap, and then scattered apart.

The dog had taken stand in a central spot, from which the parasite had been disturbed, and there stood, giving tongue. As the men drew closer and bent their eyes upon the ground, they saw something red upon it; which proved to be blood. It was dark crimson, almost black, and coagulated. Still, it was blood.

scure light under the shadow of the cypress, Darke's strange behavior and scared looks were observed.

Something besides—something yet more significant—attracted the attention of his fellow-searchers. Once or twice, as he approached the blood-stained spot, the dog sprang toward him with a fierce growl, and continued it until beaten off!

Men made note of the matter, but no comments at the time. They were too much occupied with conjectures as to what had actually occurred. Death to Charles Clancy they were now convinced; and proceeded with the search for his body.

All around, the forest was explored; along the swamp edge: up and down the sides of the sluggish creek that ran close by.

Several hours were spent by them in tramping about. But not a trace could be found of living man, or dead body. The searchers only looked for the last. Not one of them had the slightest hope of Clancy being still alive. How

straggling groups; the movement at length becoming general. They went home, determined to return on the following day, and, if necessary, renew the search.

Only two men stayed—Simeon Woodley and a companion, a young backwoodsman—like himself, a professional hunter.

"I'm darned glad they're gone off," said Woodley, as soon as the two were left alone. "Dan Boone himself kedn't take up a track wi' sech a noisy clanjamfey aroun' him. I've tuk notice o' somethin', Ned, the which I didn't weesh to make known whiles they war about—specially while Dick Darke war on the groun'. Le's go now, and see if thar's anythin' to be made out o' it."

The young hunter, whose name was Heywood—Edward Heywood—simply made sign of assent, and followed his elder *confrere*.

After walking about two hundred yards through the forest, Woodley made stop beside a cypress "knee," with his face toward it, and his eyes fixed upon a spot nearly on a level



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From under the edge of the moss-heap protruded the barrel of a gun. On kicking the loose cover aside, they saw it was a rifle—of the kind common among backwoodsmen. There were many present who identified the piece, as that which belonged to Charles Clancy.

More of the moss being removed, a hat was discovered. It was Clancy's! Half a score of the searchers knew the hat—could swear to it.

During all this time Richard Darke remained in the background, not taking an active part in the scrutiny. This was strange, too. Up to that moment he had been, to all appearance, among the foremost and most zealous.

Why did he now hold back? Why stand with pallor upon his cheeks, eyes sunken in their sockets, teeth chattering, as if an ague chill had suddenly attacked him?

It would have been fortunate for him had no one taken notice of his reticence and changed appearance. But some one had. Simeon Woodley had, and others as well. Despite the ob-

could they, with such evidence of his death before their eyes?

Nor was there any doubt about his having been killed. There was no sign to make them think he had shot himself, or otherwise committed suicide. All they had yet seen or heard, or knew, pointed to assassination—to stark, downright murder.

But what had become of the corpse? If carried away, why? Who could have carried it away? Wherefore and whither? And for what reason surreptitiously? An accumulation of mysteries!

Puzzled, almost awed by them, the searchers at length left the ground. Not, however, until after giving it that sort of investigation that satisfies the instincts of a crowd. They had spent most part of the day in this, without thinking of aught else, not even of their dinners. But night was approaching; they had grown hungry; and one after another hurried toward their homes; at first in odd individuals, then in

with his chin. It was one of the largest of those singular vegetable excrescences that perplex the botanist.

"You see that, Ned?" said the old hunter, at the same time extending his finger to point out something near the summit of the "knee."

The last Heywood did not need. His eyes were already on the object.

"I see a bullet-hole, sure—and something red around the edge of it. Looks like blood?"

"It *air* blood, an' nothin' else. It's a bullet-hole, too; and the bit o' lead lodged in thar has fust passed through some critter's skin. Else why shed thar 'a' been blood on it? Let's dig it out, and see what we kin make o' it."

Woodley took a knife from his pocket, and, springing open the blade, inserted it into the bark of the cypress, close to the bullet-hole. He did this dexterously and with caution; taking care not to touch the encrimsoned orifice the ball had made, or in any way alter its appearance. Making a circular incision around, and

gradually deepening it, he at length extracted the bit of lead, along with the wood in which it had got imbedded. He knew there was a gun-bullet inside. The point of his knife-blade told him so. He had probed the hole, before commencing to cut it out.

Weighing the piece of wood in his hand, and then passing it into that of his companion, he said:

"Ned, this here chunk o' timmer's got a bullet inside o' it that never kim out o' my rifle. Thar's big cends o' an ounce weight o' it. Only a smooth-bore ked 'a' discharged sech."

"You're right there," answered Heywood, in like manner testing the ponderosity of the piece. "It's the ball of a smooth-bore, no doubt o' it."

"Well, then, who carries a smooth-bore through these hyar woods? Who, Ned Heywood?"

"I know only one man who does."

"Name him! Name the rascal!"

"Dick Darke."

"Ye may drink afore me, Ned. That's the skunk I war a-thinkin' 'bout, an' hev been all the day. I see'd other sign before this—the which escaped the eyes o' the rest. An' I'm gled it did; for I didn't want Dick Darke to be about when I war follerin' it up. For that reason I drewed the people aside—so as none o' 'em shed notice it. By good luck they didn't."

"What other sign have you seen?"

"Tracks in the mul, clost in by the edge o' the swamp. They're a good bit from the place whar the poor young fellur hez gone down, an' hakin' away from it. I got only a glimpse at em, but I see they'd been made by a man runnin'. You bet yur life on't they war made by a pair o' boots I've see Dick Darke wearin'. It's too gloomsome now to make anythin' out o' 'em. So let's you an' me go by ourselves in the mornin' at the earliest o' daybreak, afore the people git about. Then we kin gi'e them tracks a thorrer scrutination. If they don't prove to be Dick Darke's, then call Sime Woodley a thick-headed woodchuck."

"How shall we know them to be his? If we only had his boots, so that we might compare them?"

"If! Thar's no if! We shall hev his boots—boun' to hev 'em."

"But how are we to get them?"

"Leave that to me. I've thought o' a plan to git purssession o' the skunk's futwear, an' everythin' else belongin' to him that kin throw light on this dark bizness. Come, Ned! Let's go now to the widder's house, an' see if we ken say a word o' comfort to the poor lady—for a lady she air. Belike enough this thing 'll be the death o' her. She warn't strong at best, an' she's been a deal weaker since the husban' died. Now the son's good too. Come on, Heywood! Let's show her she ain't forsook by everybody."

"I'm with you, Woodley!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SLEEP OF THE ASSASSIN.

THE night after Clancy's assassination Richard Darke did not sleep soundly. He scarce slept at all. Two causes kept him awake—the weight of guilt upon his soul, and the sting of scornful words yet ringing in his ear—these last uttered by the woman he loved—wildly worshiped.

Either should have been sufficient to torture him, and did—the last more than the first. He had no remorse for having killed the man, but much chagrin at having been slighted by the woman. The slight had contributed to the crime, making the latter less repented of. Had it served his purpose, there would have been no thought of repentance. But it had not. He had done murder, and made nothing out of it. For this reason only did he regret having done it.

In his half waking half dreaming, slumbers, he fancied he could hear the howling of a hound. It awoke him: but when awake, he thought no more of it, or only with transient apprehension. His thoughts were of Helen Armstrong—of her scorn, and his discomfiture. This was a sure thing now; and he could no longer hope. Next morning she would be gone from him—forever. A steamboat, leaving Natchez at the earliest hour of day, would convey Colonel Armstrong, with all his belongings, far away from the place. It would know them no more; and he, Richard Darke, in all probability, would never again set eyes on the woman he loved—so madly as to have committed murder for her sake.

"Why the devil did I do it?"

In this coarse shape did he express himself, as he lay upon his couch—lightly thinking of the dread deed, but weightily grieving how little it had availed him.

Such were his reflections on the first night after it. Far different were they on the second. Then Helen Armstrong was no more in his thoughts, or having there only a secondary place. Then the howls of the hound were heard, or fancied, more frequently. They did not startle him from his sleep, for he slept not at all. All night long he lay thinking of his crime, or rather of the peril in which it had placed him.

The events of the day had given him a clearer

comprehension of things; and he now knew he was in danger. No one had said anything to himself about the suspicion directed upon him. Still there was the circumstance, which might be known, that he and Clancy were rival aspirants to the hand of Helen Armstrong. He did not think it was known—he hoped not, as their rivalry would point to a motive for the murder. For all, he feared it.

He reviewed his own conduct throughout the day. During the search, and in the presence of the searchers, he had borne himself satisfactorily. He had taken an active part, counterfeiting surprise, zeal, and sorrow equal to that felt by any of the party, if not greater. It was the worst thing he could have done: since it had attracted observation. Though he had not noticed it, eyes were upon him, keenly watching his every movement, and ears listening to every speech he uttered. There had been no change in his countenance that was not noted; and comments made upon it—behind his back. As he had not heard them, he then felt secure—though far from being confidently so. He was only confident that there was no evidence, except what might be called circumstantial; and this only slight. For all, he had at times, during the day, come very near convulsive trembling. Not from any remorse of conscience, but a cold shiver had crept over him as he approached the spot where the deed had been done. And when he at length stood upon it, under the somber shadow of the cypress, among the moss with which he had shrouded the corpse; when he saw that it was no longer there, his fear was intensified. It became awe—dread, mysterious awe. Sure of having there left a dead body—the only one sure of this—what had become of it? Had the dead come to life again? Had Charles Clancy, shot through the breast—he had noted the place, by the blood gushing from it, as he held the picture before his victim's face—could Clancy have again risen to his feet? Could a man, having his body bored by a three-quarter-ounce ball, and laid prostrate along the earth, ever get up again? Was it possible for him to have survived?

As the murderer put these questions to himself, on the spot where the murder had been committed, no wonder he was awed, as well as mystified—no wonder his features showed that singular expression—so peculiar as to have attracted attention! They who noticed it, however, said nothing—at least, in his presence.

The dog had not been so reticent. As we have said, the dumb brute seemed also to have taken note of his weird, wild look, and had repeatedly barked at him.

Darke had preserved sufficient presence of mind to explain this to the searching party; telling them he had once corrected the hound while out hunting with his friend Clancy, and that ever since the animal had shown hostility to him!

The tale was plausible. For all this, it did not deceive those to whom he told it. Some of them drew deductions from it, still more unfavorable to the teller.

But if the mystery of the missing body had troubled him during the day—in the hour when his blood was up, and his nerves strung with excitement—in the night, in the dark silent hours, as he lay tossing upon his couch, it more than troubled, more than awed—it horrified him.

In vain he tried to compose himself, by shaping an explanation of the mystery. He could not comprehend it; he could not even form a probable conjecture. Was Clancy dead, or still living? Had he walked away from the ground? Or been carried from it, a corpse?

In either case the danger to him, Darke, would be almost equal. Better, of course, if Clancy were dead. For then there would be but circumstantial evidence against his assassin. If alive, he could himself give testimony of the attempt; which criminally would be almost the same.

Darke hoped he was dead. The night before he felt sure of it. Not so now. As he lay tossing on his couch—struggling with distracted thoughts—with fears that appalled him—he would have given the best runaway nigger he had ever caught, to be assured of Charles Clancy being a corpse.

And he would have granted to half a score of his father's slaves their full freedom—cheerfully given it—if this could have guaranteed him against detection, or punishment.

He was being punished, if not through remorse of conscience, by craven fear. He now knew how hard it is to sleep the sleep of the assassin, or lie awake upon a murderer's bed.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HOUSE OF MOURNING.

TO the mother of Charles Clancy it was a day of dread suspense while they were abroad searching for her son. Far more fearful the night after they had returned—not without tidings of the missing man. Such tidings! The too certain assurance of his death—of his having been assassinated, with no trace of the assassin, and no clue to the whereabouts of the body.

The mother's grief, hitherto kept in check by

a still lingering hope, now escaped all bounds, and became truly agonizing. Her heart seemed broken; if not, surely was it breaking.

Although, in her poverty without many friends, she was not left alone in her sorrow. It could not be so in the far Southwest. Several of her neighbors—rough backwoodsmen though they were—having kind hearts under their coarse homespun coats, determined to stay with her through the night.

They remained outside in the porch, smoking their pipes, conversing of the occurrences of the day, and the mystery of the murder.

At first they spoke cautiously, two and two, and only in whispers. These gradually became mutterings pronounced in louder tone; while the name of Richard Darke was frequently mentioned. He was not among the men remaining in the widow Clancy's cottage.

Soon the conversation grew general; those who took part in it expressing themselves more openly, until, at length, Dick Darke—as, for short, his neighbors called him—became the sole topic of discourse.

His behavior during the day had not escaped their notice. Even the most stolid among them had remarked a strangeness in it. In his counterfeited zeal he had overdone himself. The sharpest of the searchers only observed this; but all were struck more or less with something beyond surprise, when they saw the dog turn upon and bark at him. What could that mean?

Just as one had put this interrogatory, and answers or surmises were being offered, the same dog—the hound—was heard again giving tongue. The animal had sprung out from the porch and commenced barking, as if some person was making approach to the house. Almost simultaneously the little wicket gate in front turned upon its hinges.

A negro, the only one attached to the establishment, quieted the dog; went out, and spoke to the party at the gate. Only a few muttered words were exchanged. Then the negro came back to the house—two men following close upon his heels. These were Simeon Woodley and Ned Heywood.

The others, recognizing, rose to receive them; and the new comers became part of the conclave, still discussing the events of the day.

Woodley, looked up to by all as the man most likely to throw light on the series of mysteries perplexing them, soon became chief speaker—the rest hearkening to him as if he were an oracle.

There was no loud talking done. On the contrary, the discussion was carried on in a low tone—at times almost in whispers—the little group permitted to take part in it keeping their heads close together, so that the women and others should not hear what was said.

They who thus deliberated were in darkness. At least there was no light in the porch where they sat, except what came from the occasional flash of a candle, carried across the corridor from room to room. When this flitted over their faces, it showed upon one and all of them, an expression different from that likely to be called forth by any ordinary conversation. Eyes could be seen sparkling with passion—as of anger, held in restraint; lips tightly pressed upon teeth that seemed set determinedly on some purpose, wanting only an additional word to give it the cue for action.

The same candle's gleam revealed the form of Simeon Woodley in the center of the group, holding in his hand an object which, without being told what it was, no one could have recognized. But they to whom he was exhibiting it knew well. It was a piece of cypress wood, inside of which was the bullet of a gun. They had received full explanations as to how the ball had been thus buried, and saw the blood tinge around the orifice it had made on entering. In short, they had been made aware of everything already known to the two hunters.

Other circumstances were stated and discussed; and to a select few Woodley communicated his discovery of the footprints, as also his conjecture about the boots that might be found to correspond to them.

How he was to confirm this to himself, and prove it to the others, was also made known to this same select few; who, shortly after, mounting their horses, rode away from the house, leaving enough friends to stay by the afflicted woman—to give her their company, if they could not comfort her in her affliction.

The men who rode off with Woodley, instead of scattering, each to his own home, kept together along the road leading to the country town. When near its suburb, they stopped at a large house—known to be the residence of the sheriff.

A knock at the door, a summons to this official, and he was soon in their midst. A word or two from Woodley; and, hastily ordering his horse, he mounted and placed himself at their head.

Then all turned back along the road, as if going again to the house of Mrs. Clancy.

Not so, however. Instead, the cavalcade at a crossing took a different direction, and headed toward the plantation of Ephraim Darke; the gate of which they passed through, just as dawn began to dapple the eastern sky.

Before daylight had declared itself, they halt-

ed in front of the house; half a dozen men detaching themselves from the main body, and riding round to its rear, as if to guard against the escape of the inmates.

He, the cause of these precautionary movements, was still abed; tossing, as throughout all the night, upon a sleepless couch. But his midnight agony was easy, compared with that he was called upon to endure, when the morning light came through the window of his chamber, and along with it voices. They were many and strange, all speaking in tones of vengeance.

The assassin sprung to his feet, and, rushing across the room, looked out. It did not need this to tell him what the noise was about. His guilty heart had already guessed it. Among the half-score horsemen who had drawn up around the house, he recognized the sheriff of the county, and beside him two others, whom he knew to be Woodley and Heywood.

These three had already dismounted, and were entering the door.

In ten seconds after, they were inside his sleeping-chamber; the sheriff, as he stepped across its threshold, saying, in a firm, clear voice:

"Richard Darke, I arrest you!"

"For what?"

"For the murder of Charles Clancy!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A SOUTH-WESTERN SHERIFF.

AFTER his arrest, Richard Darke was to be conveyed to the county jail—about three miles from his father's residence.

The men, who had made him prisoner, took note of every circumstance attending the arrest. They searched the chamber in which he had slept—the whole house, in fact. There were few of them who owed Ephraim Darke any goodwill, but many the contrary. His accumulated wealth, used only for selfish ends, had not gained him popularity in the neighborhood. Besides, he was not a Southerner *pur sang*, as

most of his neighbors were. They knew him to be from the New England States; and, although there was not a bit of Abolitionist in him, but much of the opposite, still he was not liked either by planter or "poor white."

The sheriff and his party, therefore, used little ceremony while in the act of making the arrest: ransacking the house, and examining its most sacred *arcana*. They took possession of the double-barreled gun, which Richard was in the habit of carrying, as also the suit of clothes he usually wore when out in the woods. In the coat—it was noted this was not the same he had on during the day of the search—was found a hole that looked as if freshly made, and by a bullet! It was through the skirt, and had a torn, tattered edge.

Among the men present when he was made prisoner, were several who could read such sign, and interpret it as surely, or more surely, than an expert would identify a particular handwriting. Notably of these was the hunter Woodley. At a glance, he pronounced the hole in the coat-skirt to have been made by a bullet, and one that had passed through the barrel of a rifled gun.

Several others, after looking at it, confirmed Woodley's assertion.

The circumstance was significant; and led to renewed conjectures among those surrounding the sheriff.

No one thought of questioning the prisoner about it—not now, that he was in the hands of the law. All further formal investigation would be postponed till the trial, soon to take place. The party arresting him only busied themselves about evidence to be sifted at a later period.

Besides the hole through the coat-skirt, the sheriff's posse found nothing else that seemed to point specially toward the crime—except the double-barreled gun. To its bore exactly fitted the bullet which the hunters had extracted from the cypress-knee, and which was now in possession of those instructed to prosecute. Woodley, however, apart, and acting on his own account,

had discovered a pair of boots, heavily laden with mud, hidden away under a heap of rubbish at the bottom of an old peach orchard. The backwoodsman had surreptitiously kept these to himself, intending to make private, and particular, use of them; his comrade, Heywood, being alone made privy to the secret of their discovery.

Having finished their investigation of the premises, the sheriff's party hurried their prisoner off to the county town; leaving his father behind in a state of terrible bewilderment, half crying, half crazily cursing.

Most of the men, hitherto following the chief officer of the law, parted with him at the plantation-gate. He and his constables were thought enough to keep charge of the accused. A sheriff in the South-western States is a very different sort of individual from the men who perform the duties of this office in the north, or the grand dignitaries, with scarce any duties at all, in a shire of England. He of the backwoods must be a man of unflinching courage—indeed, often desperate—else the mandates intrusted to him would result in a failure of justice, and a mockery of the executive power. It is rarely that they do—rare, indeed, when a Mississippian sheriff proves recreant to his trust. Far more common to find him ready to die, or at least risk death, in the performance of his dangerous duty; and not unfrequently is this the actual result. While traveling through the South-western States, I have often witnessed, and admired as well, the wonderful self-sacrificing bravery of these responsible officers of the law. Who could help admiring it?

Therefore, the party who had been with the sheriff, assisting in the arrest, saw no necessity for following him further. They had full confidence that he would deposit his prisoner within the county jail. So, parting with him and his constables—after passing out of Darke's plantation-gate—they turned off in a different direction. Whether or not the murderer had been discovered—most of them believed he was



"SO THERE, IMAGE OF ONE ONCE LOVED—PICTURE OF ONE WHO HAS BEEN FALSE."—Page 15.

—they had yet to search for the body of the murdered man.

Again, as on the day before, they separated into several parties—each taking a tract of the woods, though all keeping in the neighborhood where the blood had been spilled, and Clancy's gun and hat found.

But their search again proved as fruitless, as on the preceding day. More so: since on the second scouring of the woods nothing new was discovered that could throw additional light upon the commission of the crime, or aid them in recovering the corpse.

Again they dragged and poled the creek up and down, penetrating into the swamps as far as was possible, or likely that a dead body could have been carried for concealment. In its deep dark recesses they found no trace of man, either living or dead; only the solitude-loving crane, the snake-bird, and the scaly alligator.

It was but a poor report to take back to the plantations; a sad one for the mother of the missing man.

She never received it. Before the returning searchers could speak the unsatisfactory intelligence into her ear, Mrs. Clancy lay cold in death.

The long-endured agony of ill fortune, the more recent one of widowhood, and now this new bereavement of a lost only son; for she fully believed him lost—basely assassinated—this accumulated anguish was too much for her woman's strength, of late failing. And when the neighbors got back, clustering around her dwelling, they could hear sounds within, that told of some new disaster.

On the night before they had heard the same; but now the tone was different. Then the widow's voice was lifted in lamentation; now it was not heard at all.

Whatever of mystery there might be, it soon received elucidation.

A woman, coming out upon the porch, and raising her hand in token of silence, said, in sad, solemn voice,

"Mrs. Clancy is dead!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE "BELLE OF NATCHEZ."

WHILE search was being made for the body of the murdered man—while that of his mother, alike murdered, was lying cold upon her bed of death—while the murderer of both was cowering within the cell of a prison—a steamboat was cleaving the current of the Red River of Louisiana; slowly forging its course up-stream; its single paddle-wheel—for it had only one—beating the ocher-colored water into foam, that, floating far behind, danced and simmered upon the surface, foaming a wake-way of what appeared to be blood-froth.

It was a little "stern-wheel" steamer, such as in those days plied upon many of the tributaries of the Mississippi; the impulsive power being confined to a single set of paddles, placed where the rudder acts in most other vessels, and looking very much like the wheel of an old-fashioned water-mill.

The boat in question was called the "Belle of Natchez;" perhaps somewhat pretentiously: since it was but an indifferent sort of craft—small in size, and poor in its appointments. On the particular trip of which we are speaking it might more appropriately have laid claim to the distinctive appellation; since it carried a young lady who, for some time, had borne it without denial or dispute.

The lady was Helen Armstrong, known among Mississippians as the "Belle of Natchez." By singular coincidence, the boat so designated was bearing her away from her Mississippi home—from scenes long loved and cherished; once joyful, now sad; in retrospect only sacred to the sacrifice of her heart.

Was she leaving that heart behind her? No. It was with her, within her breast; but breaking—well-nigh broken.

The "high-pressure" steam-craft that ply upon the western rivers of America have but slight resemblance to the black, low-hulled levathans that plow the waters of the Atlantic. The steamer of the Mississippi more resembles a house, rounded off at the corners to an oblong oval shape, painted snow-white, two stories in height, the upper one furnished on each face with a row of casement windows, which serve also as outside doors to the state-rooms. Inside ones, opposite these, give admission to the main cabin, or "saloon," which runs midway through the boat for almost its whole length—glass folding doors dividing it into three compartments. These are the ladies' cabin aft, the dining-saloon in the center, and a third division forward containing a "bar," used only by the male passengers, for smoking, drinking, and too often gambling.

Along the casements, opening outside, each furnished with green jalousies or Venetian shutters, runs a narrow balcony, with a low balustrade, or guard-rail, to keep a careless passenger from falling off into the flood. The same is carried round the stern of the boat, ladies' cabin included. A projection of the roof, termed the "hurricane deck," acts as an awning to this outside gallery, shading it from the

sun. Two immense twin-chimneys—or "funnels," as called—stand up out of the hurricane-deck, pouring forth a continuous volume of white wood-smoke; while a third but smaller tube, termed the "scape-pipe," intermittently vomits smoke still whiter; the steam at each emission giving a hoarse bark that may be heard for miles along the river.

On such a steamer—differing from others only in having a stern-wheel instead of side-paddles—had Colonel Armstrong embarked with his family, transporting them to the "wilder west."

And up the Red River of Louisiana they were making way; slowly, as a stern-wheel boat of scarce a hundred horse-power, against a rapid and turbulent current, must needs make it.

It was the hour of night—the second after leaving Natchez—but not late. Lights gleaming from open cabin windows, or shimmering through the Venetian shutters, told that but few, if any, of the passengers had yet retired to rest. It was, in truth, but the after-tea hour, when the tables of the main saloon had been cleared, and gentlemen, as also ladies, sat around them to read; play cribbage; perhaps, take a hand at some round game of cards, as "vingt-un" or "beggar-my-neighbor." The square games—often not so square as regards the honesty of the play—were carried on in the bar-saloon, further forward.

On this particular "trip" there chanced to be many lady passengers on board the Belle of Natchez—as also several gentlemen—some of them accomplished and agreeable. For this reason the Armstrong girls had no need to be sufferers from solitude.

Notwithstanding, one of them was so—seeming to prefer it.

Is it necessary to say which? No. The reader has already guessed—Helen.

Escaping from the saloon, with its continuous hum of conversation—from speeches that but wearied, and flattery that only fashed her—she had taken refuge on the stern-guards of the boat, abaft the ladies' cabin. Notwithstanding the hour, she there found herself alone. The other ladies had each some attraction to keep them inside—her sister a very particular one.

In Jessie's case it was a young planter named Dupre; a Louisiana Creole, who had his plantation in the neighborhood of Natchitoches, whither the boat was bearing them. He had been to Natchez upon business, and was now returning home.

His handsome features, brunette complexion, black eyes, and gracefully curling hair had made havoc with the heart of Jessie Armstrong, in less than twenty-four hours after their first meeting. *En revanche*, her contrasting colors of red, blue, and gold, seemed to have held their own in the amorous encounter.

So that, before the Belle of Natchez had steamed fifty miles up the Red River, these two of her passengers, judging from their behavior, showed unmistakable symptoms of making a much longer voyage in company—in short, a journey through life.

Colonel Armstrong took note of their "billing and cooing," but made no objection to it. Why should he? The gentleman was known upon the boat as one of the wealthiest planters in his State; equally noted as a noble young fellow—brave, accomplished, and of irreproachable character—such as are often found among the Creoles of Louisiana.

Jessie Armstrong had chosen well; though it was not wealth that had influenced her choice. Only love—intuitive, instinctive; true love, with, perhaps, the usual alloy of passion.

Her elder sister had no jealousy, not even envy. The love that occupied Helen's heart—that had torn, and left it lorn—was the one love of a life. It could never be replaced by another. If she had any thought about her sister's new-sprung happiness, it was not envy at her being happy, but sadness from its light of joy contrasting with the shadow of her own misery.

As she stood upon the stern-guards of the steamboat, her eyes now mechanically bent upon the revolving wheel that whipped the water into foam, now piercing the darkness beyond, she felt stealing over her a darker thought—that still more terrible than sadness—that which oft prompts to life's annihilation. The man to whom she had given her heart—its firstlings as well as fullness—a heart in which there could be no second gleanings, and she knew it—this man had made light of the sacrifice. And it was a sacrifice grand, because glowing with the whole interests of her life.

The life, too, of a woman gifted with rare excellences of spirit and person; queenly, commanding; above all, beautiful.

She did not think this about herself, as she leant over the guard-rail of the steamer. She only thought of her humiliation; of having been humiliated by him at whose feet she had flung herself; fondly, but too recklessly, surrendering that which woman holds most dear—the last syllable of rendition.

To Charles Clancy she had spoken it—in writing only, but in terms unmistakable. The remembrance of that was now the cause of her chagrin, as of her shame.

Both might be ended in an instant. A step over the railing, a plunge into the red rolling river, a momentary struggle amidst its foaming waves—not to save life, but to destroy it—this, and all would be over! Sadness, jealousy, disappointed love—these bitter passions, and all others alike—could be ended in one little effort—a leap into oblivion!

Her nerves were fast becoming strung to the taking it. The past all seemed dark, the future still darker. For her, life had lost its fascinations, while death was equally divested of its terrors.

Suicide in one so young, so fair, so incomparably lovely, one capable of charming others, no longer to be charmed herself! Suicide, fearful to think of! And yet she was contemplating it!

She stood upon the guards, wavering, irresolute. It was no lingering love of life, nor fear of death, that caused her to hesitate. Nor yet the horrid form of death she could not fail to see before her, sprung she but over that slight railing.

The moon was up, coursing the sky above in full effulgence, its beams falling upon the broad bosom of the river. At intervals the boat, keeping the deeper channel, was forced close to either bank. Then, as the surging eddies set the floating, but stationary, logs in motion, the huge saurian asleep on them could be heard giving a grunt at having been so rudely awakened, and pitching over into the current with a sullen plunge.

She saw and heard all this. It should have shaken her nerves, and caused trembling throughout her frame.

It did neither the one nor the other. The despair of life deadened all dread of death—even of being devoured by an ugly alligator!

Fortunately, at that moment, a gentle hand was laid upon her shoulder, and a soft voice sounded in her ear. They were the hand and voice of her sister.

Jessie, coming out from the state-room behind, had glided silently up. She saw Helen prepossessed, sad, and could divine the cause. She little knew how near things had been to a fatal climax—and dreamt not of the diversion her coming had caused.

"Sister!" she said, caressingly, "why do you stay out here? The night is chilly; and they say the atmosphere of this Red River country is full of miasma, with fevers to follow, and agues to shake the comb out of one's hair! Let us go inside, then! There's right good company in the cabin, and we're going to have a round game at cards—vingt-un, or something of the sort. Come in with me!"

Helen turned round, trembling at the other's touch, as if she had been a criminal, and it was the sheriff's hand she felt upon her shoulder.

Jessie noticed the strange, strong emotion. She could not fail to do so. Attributing it to its remotest cause, that morning confided to her, she said:

"Be a woman, Helen! a true, strong woman, as I know you are! Don't think of him any more. There's a new world, a new life, opening to both of us. Forget the sorrows of the old, as I shall. Pluck Charles Clancy from your heart, and fling every memory, every thought of him, to the winds! I say again, be a woman—be yourself! Forget the past, and think only of the future—of our father!"

The words came like a galvanic shock, at the same time soft and soothing as balm. They had this effect upon the spirit of Helen Armstrong. They had touched a tender chord—that of filial affection.

And it vibrated true to the touch.

Flinging her arms around Jessie's neck, and kissing her rose-tinted cheek, she said:

"Sister, you have saved me!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

SEIZED BY SPECTRAL ARMS.

"SISTER, you have saved me!"

Such was Helen Armstrong's speech, as she placed her head on her sister's shoulder, and pressed that sister's cheek with lips pouring forth affection.

Returning the kiss, Jessie looked not a little perplexed. She could neither comprehend the meaning of the words, nor their choking utterance. Equally was she at a loss to account for the convulsive trembling throughout her sister's frame, while their bosoms remained in contact.

Helen gave her no time to ask questions.

"Go in!" she said, causing the other to face round, and pushing her toward the door of the state-room—"In, and set the vingt-un a-going. I'll join you for the game by the time you've got the cards dealt."

Jessie, glad to see her sister once more in a pleasant mood, made no protest, but gleefully re-entered the cabin.

As soon as her back was turned, Helen once more faced toward the river—stepping close up to the stern guard-rail. The wheel was still revolving its paddles as before, beating the water into bubbles, and casting the reddish-white spray afar over the surface of the stream.

Now, she had no thought of flinging herself into the seething current, though she meant doing so for something else.

"Before the game of vingt-un begins," she said, "here's a pack of cards to be dealt out—with a portrait among them."

As she spoke, she drew forth a bundle of letters—evidently old letters—tied in a ribbon of blue silk. One after another, she pulled them free from the fastening—just as if dealing out cards. Each, as it came clear, was rent right across the middle, and tossed despitely into the stream.

At the bottom of the packet, after the letters had been all disposed of, was a photograph picture. It was a likeness of Charles Clancy, given to her on one of those days when he had flung himself appealingly at her feet.

She did not tear it in twain, like the letter; though at first this appeared to be her intent. Some thought striking her, she held it up before the moon, her eyes for a time resting upon, and closely scanning it. Strange wild memories, winters of them, seemed to roll over her face, while she thus made scrutiny of the features so indelibly engraven upon her heart. She was looking her last upon them, in the hope of being able to erase the image, as she had a determination to do.

Who can tell what was then passing within that heart? Who could describe its desolation? Certainly no writer of romance.

Whatever resolve she had arrived at, for a while she appeared to hesitate about the executing it.

Then, like an echo, heard amidst the rippling waters, came back into her ear the words spoken by her sister:

"Let us think only of our father."

The thought decided her; and stepping out to the extremest end of the guard-rail, she flung the photograph upon the paddles of the revolving wheel, as she did so, saying:

"Go there, image of one once loved—picture of one who has been false. Be crushed, and broken, as he has broken my heart!"

The sigh that escaped her, as she surrendered the bit of cardboard, was more like a scream—a cry of anguish. It had the accent that could only come from that she had spoken of—a broken heart.

As she turned away to re-enter the cabin of the steamboat, she seemed ill-prepared for taking part, or pleasure, in a hand of cards.

And she took not either. That game of vingt-un was never played.

Still half distraught with the agony through which her soul had passed—the traces of which she knew must be visible on her face—before appearing in the brilliantly-lighted saloon, she passed round the corner of the ladies' cabin, intending to enter her own state-room by the outside door.

It was but to spend a moment before her looking-glass, to arrange her dress, the coiffure of her hair—perhaps the expression of her face—all things that to a man may appear trivial, but to a woman important—even in the hour of sadness and despair. No blame to woman for acting thus. It is but an instinct—the primary care of her life—the secret spring of her influence and power.

In repairing to her toilette, Helen Armstrong was but following the example of her sex.

She did not follow it far—not so far as to get before the looking-glass, or even inside the room. Before entering it, she made stop by the door, and stood with face turned toward the river's bank. The boat had sheered close in shore; so close that the tall forest-trees shadowed her track—the tips of their branches almost sweeping the hurricane-deck.

They were cypresses, festooned with Spanish moss, that hung down like the drapery of a death-bed. One was blighted, stretching forth bare limbs, blanched white by the weather, desiccated and jointed like the arms of a skeleton.

It was a ghostly sight, and caused her a slight shivering, as under the clear moonbeams the steamer swept past the place.

It was a relief to her, when the boat got back again into darkness.

Only momentary; for then, under the shadow of the cypresses, amidst the fearful coruscation of the fireflies, she saw the face of Charles Clancy!

It was among the trees high up, on a level with the hurricane-deck.

It could only have been fancy! Clancy could not be there, either in the trees, or on the earth! The thing could only be a deception of her senses—a delusive vision, such as occurs to clairvoyants, at times deceiving themselves.

Hallucination or not, Helen Armstrong had no time to reflect upon it. Before the face of her false lover faded from her view, a pair of arms, black, sinewy, and stiff, were stretched toward her; roughly grasped her around the waist, and lifted her into the air!

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT BECAME OF HER.

HELEN ARMSTRONG gave a shriek, as she felt herself elevated into the air, where for a time she was held suspended. Only for an instant—just long enough for her to see the boat pass on beneath. At the same instant she caught sight of her sister, as the latter rushed out upon the

guards, and gave a piercing cry in reply to her own.

As she herself screamed a second time, whatever had seized her suddenly relaxed its hold; and her next sensation was of falling from a giddy height, till the fall was broken by a plunge into water. She experienced a severe shock, striking her almost senseless. She was only sensible of a drumming in her ears, a choking in the throat—in short, the sensation that precedes asphyxia by drowning.

The responsive cries given out by the two girls, and then continuously kept up by Jessie, brought the passengers rushing out of the saloon, a crowd collecting upon the stern-guards.

"Some one overboard!" was the thought, and the shout that rung through the vessel. It reached the ear of the pilot, who, instantly ringing the "stop" bell, caused the paddle-wheel to suspend its revolutions, bringing the steamer to a sudden stop. The strong current, against which the boat was at the time contending, contributed to its suddenness.

Meanwhile, Jessie, the only one who had witnessed the mysterious catastrophe, was too much awed by its mystery to give any intelligible explanation of it. She could only frantically exclaim:

"My sister! taken up into the air! She's now down in the water! Oh, save her! Save her!"

"In the water—where?" asked a voice, whose earnest tone spoke of readiness to respond to the appeal.

"Yonder—there—under that great tree. She was in its top first, then dropped down into the river. I heard the plunge, but did not see her after. She has sunk to the bottom. Merciful Heavens! Oh Helen—sister! Where are you?"

The people were puzzled, by these incoherent speeches. Both passengers above, and boatmen on the under-deck, were alike mystified. They stood as if spell-bound.

Fortunately, one of the former had retained his presence of mind, and along with it his coolness. Fortunately, too, he had the courage to act under the emergency. As also the capacity, being a swimmer of the first class. It was he who had asked the question "Where?"—the young planter, Louis Dupre. He only waited to hear the answer. While it was being given, he had hurriedly divested himself of his coat and foot wear. In evening costume, his shoes were easily kicked off—white waistcoat and coat tossed aside at the same time. Then, without staying to hear half the offered explanation, he sprang over the guards, and swam toward the spot pointed out.

"Brave, noble fellow!" was the thought of Jessie, her admiration for the man—now her acknowledged suitor—for the moment making her forget the peril in which her sister was placed.

But it now seemed less. Confident in her lover's strength, believing him capable of anything, she felt almost sure that Helen would be saved.

She stood, as did every one else upon the steamer, watching with earnest, anxious eyes. Hers were more; they were flashing with wild feverish excitement; giving glances of hope at intervals alternating with the fixed gaze of fear—the expression of her features changing in correspondence.

There might be wonder at her hopes, but none at her fears. The moon had sunk to the level of the tree-tops, and the bosom of the river was in dark shadow; darker by the bank where the boat was now drifting. But little chance there was to distinguish an object in the water—less for one swimming upon its surface. And then the river was deep, its current rapid, its waves turbid and full of dangerous eddies. In addition, it was a spot infested—well known to be the favorite haunt of that hideous reptile, the alligator, with the equally dreaded gar-fish—the shark of the South-western waters. All these things were in the thoughts of those who stood bending over the stern-guards of the Belle of Natchez; causing them anxiety for the fate, not only of the beautiful young lady who had fallen overboard, but the handsome, courageous gentleman who had plunged in, and was swimming to her rescue.

Anxiety would be a light word—a slight, trivial feeling—compared with that throbbing in the breast, and showing itself in the countenance of Jessie Armstrong. Hers was the torture of terrible suspense; gradually growing into the acute agony of despair, as time passed, and the young planter returned not, nor was anything to be seen of him in the water. Then her father, standing by her side, could do little to comfort her. He, too, was paralyzed—a prey to agonized emotions.

The steamer's boat had been manned, and set loose as quickly as could be done. It was now right over the spot where the swimmer had been last seen, and all eyes were fixed upon it—all ears listening to catch any word of cheer.

Not long had they to listen. From the shadowed surface of the river came a shout sent up in joyous tones.

"She's saved!"

Then, quickly after, spoke a rough boatman's voice.

"All right! We've got 'em both. Throw us a rope!"

The rope was thrown by ready hands, after which came the command, "Haul in!"

A light, held high up on the steamer, flashed its beams down into the boat. Lying along its thwarts could be perceived a form—that of a lady—in a dress once white, now discolored by the muddy water filtering from its skirts. Her head rested upon the knees of a man, whose scant garments were similarly saturated.

It was Helen Armstrong, supported in the arms of Louis Dupre.

She appeared lifeless; and the first sight of her drew anxious exclamations from those standing upon the steamer.

Only for a short while was the anxiety endured. A few minutes after she had been carried to her stateroom, there came from it the report that she still lived, and was out of danger. Colonel Armstrong himself imparted to his fellow-passengers this intelligence—joyfully received by every one of them.

Inside the stateroom of the two sisters, after their father had gone forth, there was a little bit of a scene, with a conversation that may be worth repeating. The younger commenced it by saying:

"Tell me, Helen! Dear sister, don't be afraid to speak the truth. Why did you jump overboard?"

"Jump overboard! What are you talking about, Jessie?"

"I declare I don't know myself. It seems such a mystery, all of it. I saw you for some time up in the air, as if hovering there, like an angel, on wings! I'd be willing to swear that I saw you so. Of course, it could only have been my fancy, frightened as I was at seeing you fall overboard. After that you appeared to drop straight down, your white skirt streaming after. Then I heard a plunge. Oh Helen! it was fearful; both the fancy and the reality. What did it mean?"

"That was just what I was asking myself at the time you saw me suspended, as you say, in the air; for so I was, dear Jessie. I soon afterward arrived at the explanation of it. Though puzzling me then, as it does you still, nothing can be more simple."

"But what was it, anyhow?"

"Well, then, it was this: As I stood leaning over the guard-rail I was suddenly carried away from it, as if by a pair of strong, bony arms. After keeping me awhile, they released me from their grasp, letting me fall plump into the river, where certainly I should have been drowned but for—"

"For Louis—my dear Louis!"

"Ah! Jessie; I don't wonder at your admiration. He deserves it all. I am envious, but not jealous. I can never know that feeling again."

"Dear sister! do not think of such things. Don't you see you haven't yet explained the strangest part? What carried you into the air? You speak of a pair of arms. What kind of arms? To whom did they belong?"

"To a ghostly cypress-tree. Yes, Jessie; that is the explanation of what mystifies you, as it did me for a while. I know all about it now. A great outstretching limb, forked at the end, had caught the steamer somewhere forward, and got bent down. It caught me, also, just as it was springing up again, and gave me the swing, and the drop, and the good ducking I've had. Now you know all."

A sweet joy thrilled through Jessie's heart on receiving this explanation. She was no longer troubled with a suspicion, hitherto distressing her. Her sister had not intended suicide!

CHAPTER XX.

A BACKWOODS JURY IN DELIBERATION.

THE men who, after the second day's search, had returned to Mrs. Clancy's cottage, were few in number, being only her more intimate friends and well-wishers. Most of the searchers had gone direct to their own homes.

Soon, however, the news spread abroad that the mother of the murdered man was herself stricken down. This, giving a fresh stimulus to sympathy, as well as curiosity, caused all to assemble anew—many starting from the beds, to which they had betaken themselves after the day's fatigue.

Before midnight there was a crowd around the house, greater than any that had yet collected. And of the voices mingling in conversation the tone was more excited and angry. It was only subdued in the presence of that corpse, lying cold upon its couch, its pale face turned appealingly toward them.

From the dead there was no need of any appeal to cause a demand for justice. Many of the living were loudly calling for it; and close to the chamber of death, knots of men, with their heads near together, were discussing the ways and means of obtaining it surely and quickly.

In such cases there are always some who command. It may not be from any superiority of rank or wealth. In the hour of need the rightful chieftains—those whom God designed should lead—are recognized, and acknowledged.

A group, composed principally of these, stood in front of the cottage, debating what was best to be done. It was a true backwoods jury, roughly improvised, and not confined to twelve; for there were more than twenty taking part in the deliberation. They had drawn together by a sort of tacit and common consent, and by the same had a foreman been appointed, a planter of standing in the neighborhood.

The question in debate was at first twofold: Had Charles Clancy been murdered? And, if so, who was his murderer?

The former was soon decided in the affirmative. No one had the slightest doubt about the crime. The conjectures of all were turned toward the criminal. What proof could be brought forward to fix it on the man that day arrested, and who was now lying in the jail to await legal trial?

Every sign seen by any of the collected crowd, every incident that had transpired, was as calmly discussed, and carefully weighed by this rough, backwoods jury, as if it had been composed of the twelve best men to be found in the most civilized city. Perhaps with more intelligence—certainly with as much determination to arrive at a righteous verdict.

They discussed not only the occurrences of which they had been made aware, but the motives that might lead to them. Among these last came prominently up the relations that had existed between the two men. There had been nothing hitherto known to tell of any hostility, that might lead to the commission of such a crime.

There was little said about Darke's relations with the family of the Armstrongs, and less of Helen Armstrong in particular. It was suspected that he had sought the hand of the young lady; but no one thought of Clancy having been his rival. Up to that time Colonel Armstrong had maintained a proud position. It was not probable that he would have permitted his daughter to think of matching with a man circumstanced as was Charles Clancy.

Clancy's love secret had been carefully kept. None were privy to it. A few only suspected it—among these his mother, whose lips were now sealed by death.

Had the deliberating backwoodsmen but known that he had been Darke's rival suitor—still more, the successful one—it would have given a different turn to their deliberations—almost a key to the crime. Than such motive, nothing points more surely to murder.

Had Helen Armstrong been herself present among them, or near—anywhere that she could have had tidings of the tragical events exciting the settlement—there would have been no difficulty about their coming to a conclusion. The self-constituted jury would, in all probability, have been told something to elicit from them a quick verdict, an equally quick sentence, with, perhaps, its instant execution.

But Helen Armstrong was no longer there—no longer near. By that time she must have been hundreds of miles from the place, she and all related to her. Any secret she could have disclosed was not available for that trial going on by the widow Clancy's cottage.

And, as no one suspected her of having such secret, her name was only mentioned incidentally, without any thought of her being able to throw light upon the dark mystery they were endeavoring to make clear.

For several hours they remained in consultation, weighing the testimony that had been laid before them.

The circumstances that seemed to fix the guilt upon Darke were repeatedly passed in review, and still they did not bring conviction—at least, not complete. No one of them but might have been compatible with his innocence. A bullet fitting a smooth-bore fowling-piece, however exactly, was not of itself testimony sufficient to hang a man; even though Clancy's body had been found with the ball in it. Both these conditions were wanting to the chain of evidence. The body had not been found, and the bullet was only buried in the bark of a cypress-knee.

The blood which it had carried with it into the wood was evidence of its having first passed through living flesh—whether that of man, or animal, could not be decided.

The torn hole through the skirt of Darke's coat, connected with Clancy's gun having been found discharged, looked more like something from which a deduction could be drawn, unfavorable to the accused. Though it might also favor him, as proof of a fight between the two, and that the killing of Clancy was not a premeditated murder. Of this circumstance Darke had offered no explanation. After his arrest he had preserved a sullen silence, and refused to answer interrogatories.

"You're going to try me," he said, in reply to a question put by one of the sheriff's party. "Twill be time enough then to explain what appears to puzzle you."

The worst appearances against him had been his own behavior, as also that of the dog—both, to say the least, exceedingly suspicious. About the latter he had made a statement upon the ground; though it had failed to satisfy those of the searching party who were most prone to suspect him. And, now that time had elapsed,

and they had sufficiently reflected upon it, his account of the affair seemed still less like the true one. His having once chastised Clancy's dog might, naturally enough, make the animal afterward spiteful toward him. But why had this spite not been shown while they were around the cottage before setting out on the search? Why was it only made manifest, and in such earnest manner, after they had arrived under the cypress—beyond doubt the place where the dog had last looked upon his master?

Although still nothing more than circumstantial, to many of those engaged in the inquiry, this chapter of testimony appeared almost conclusive of Darke's guilt.

During the deliberations two individuals came upon the ground, who contributed an additional item of information, corroborative of this. These were Simeon Woodley and Ned Heywood. Their added testimony referred to the footprints seen by the swamp's edge. After assisting at the arrest they had proceeded thither, taking Darke's boots—which Woodley had surreptitiously secured—along with them. Like the bullet to the barrel of his gun, his boots were found to fit the tracks exactly. No others could have made those marks in the mud. So certified the two hunters, declaring their readiness to make oath of it.

It was another link in the chain of circumstantial evidence, still further strengthening the case against the accused.

As these facts were brought forward, one after another, the group of deliberators seemed gradually subsiding into a fixed belief, likely soon to end in action—that sort usually taken by the executive officers of "Justice Lynch."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE COON-HUNTER CONSCIENCE-STRICKEN.

BLUE BILL, after confiding the dread secret to his sable spouse, felt altogether easier in his mind; and having, as related, lain down by her side in the midst of his black olive-branches, on that night, slept soundly enough.

As yet he had no certain knowledge, that a murder had been committed. He only knew that a fight must have taken place between two men, one of whom was his young master, and the other he presumed to be Charles Clancy. He had heard the exchange of shots, and afterward saw the former rushing past in reckless retreat, which seemed to show that the affair must have had a tragical ending, and that Clancy had been killed. Still the coon-hunter could not know it to be so; and, hoping that it might be otherwise, he was not so much frayed by the affair as to lose his night's rest.

In the morning, when, as usual, hoe in hand, he went abroad to his work, no one would have suspected him to be the depository of a secret so momentous. He was noted as the gayest of the working gang—his laugh the loudest, longest and merriest, carried across the plantation fields, whether among corn-stalks, cotton-plants, or tobacco-leaves; and on that particular day, it rung with its wonted cheerfulness.

Only during the earlier hours. When at mid-day a report reached the place where the slaves were at work, that a man had been murdered, a white man, a neighbor who lived near by, and that this man was Charles Clancy, the coon-hunter, in common with the rest of the gang, threw down his hoe, all uniting in a shout of sympathetic sorrow. For all of them knew young "Massa Clancy," most respecting, and many of them loving him. He had been accustomed to meet them with pleasant looks, and accost them with kindly words.

The sad tidings produced a profound impression upon all; and from that moment, though their task had to be continued, there was no more cheerfulness in the tobacco-field. Even their conversation was hushed, or carried on in a low, subdued tone; the hoes being alone heard as their steel blades struck upon an occasional stone.

But while his fellow-laborers were only silent through sorrow, Blue Bill was speechless from another and different cause. They only knew that young Massa Clancy had been killed—murdered as the report reached them—while he knew how, when, where, and by whom. This knowledge made him feel different from the rest; for while sorrowing as much, and perhaps more than any, for Charles Clancy's death, he had fears for his own life, and good reasons for having them.

He well knew that if Dick Darke should become acquainted with the fact of his having been a witness to that rapid retreat among the trees, he, Blue Bill, would be speedily put where his tongue could never give testimony. In short, the coon-hunter saw that his life was in danger of being compromised by his ill-luck—in being the involuntary spectator of a crime, or at least of such circumstances as would prove its committal. In full consciousness of this, he determined not to commit himself by any voluntary avowal of what he had seen, or heard; but resolved to bury the secret in his own breast, and to insist upon its being so interred within the bosom of his better half.

That day Phoebe was not in the field along with the working-gang; and this gave him an-

xiety. The coon-hunter could trust his wife's affections, but was not so confident as to her prudence. She might say something in the "quarter" to compromise him. A word—the slightest hint of what had happened—might lead to his being questioned, and confessed—with torture, if the truth were suspected.

No wonder that during the rest of the day Blue Bill wore an air of abstraction, and hoed the tobacco-plants with a careless hand, often chopping off the leaves. Fortunately for him, his fellow-slaves were not in a mood to observe these vagaries, or make inquiry as to the cause.

He was rejoiced when the sound of the evening bell summoned them back to the "big house."

Soon he was once more in the midst of his picaninies, with Phoebe by his side; to whom he imparted a fresh caution to "keep dark on dat ere seerous subject."

They talked over the events of the day—Phoebe being the narrator. She told him of all that had happened—of the search, and such incidents connected with it as had reached the plantation of the Darke; how both the old and young master had taken part in it, both having returned home. She added, of her own observation, that Massa Dick looked "berry scared-like, an' white in de cheeks as a ole she-possom."

"Dats jess de way he oughter look," was Blue Bill's response. After which they ate their frugal supper, and once more went to rest.

But on this second night the terrible secret, shared by them, kept both from sleeping. Neither got so much as a doze.

And as morning dawned, they were startled by hearing noises in the negro-quarter. They were not the usual sounds consequent on the uprising of their fellow-slaves; a commingling of voices in jest and cheerful laughter. On the contrary, it was a din of serious significance, with cries that told of calamity.

When the coon-hunter drew back his door and looked forth, he saw commotion outside; and was soon told its cause. One of his fellow-bondsmen coming forward, said:

"Mass' Dick am arressed by de sheriff. Dey tuk 'im for de murder of Mass' Cha'l' Clancy."

The coon-hunter rushed out and on to the big house. He reached it in time to see Richard Darke set upon a horse, and taken off to the county jail. Then, with a feeling relief, he returned to his Phoebe.

"Now," he said to her, "dar ain't no longer so much reezun to hab fear. I see Sime Woodley 'mong de men, and dis nigger know dat he'll gub me his proteckshun, whatsomever I see do. So, Phoebe gal, I've made up my mind to make a clean bress ob de hul t'ing, and tell what I heern an' see, besides deluverin' up boaf de letter an' de picter. What's yar view ob de matter? 'Peak plain, and doan' be noways mealy-mouthed 'bout it."

"My views is den, for de tellin' ob de troof. Ole Eph Darke may flog us till dar ain't a bit o' skin left upon our backs. I'll take my share ob de 'sponsibility an' half ob de floggin'. But let the troof be tole—de whole troof, an' nuffin' but de troof."

"Den it shall be did. Phoebe, you're a darlin'. Kiss me, ole gal. If need be, we'll die toged-der."

And the two black faces came in contact, their bosoms, too—both beating with a humanity that might shame whiter skins.

CHAPTER XXII.

A VOLUNTARY WITNESS.

WHILE the improvised jury was still in consultation and yet undecided, the little clock on the mantel struck twelve midnight; of late not oft a merry hour in the cottage of the Clancys, but this night more than ever sad.

The striking of the clock seemed the announcement of a crisis. For a time it silenced the voices of those conversing, both inside the house and out.

And scarce had the last stroke ceased to vibrate on the night air, when a voice was heard, that had not yet taken part in the deliberations. It sounded as if coming from the road-gate.

"Mass' Woodley in da?" spoke the voice, interrogatively; the question addressed to the group in front of the house.

"Yes; he's here," simultaneously answered several.

"Kin I 'peak a wud wif you, Mass' Woodley?" again asked the inquirer at the gate.

"Sartinly," said the hunter, separating from the others, and striding toward the road entrance.

"I reck'n I know that voice," he added, on drawing near. "It's Blue Bill, ain't it?"

"Hush, Mass' Woodley! For Gorumity's sake doan' 'peak out my name. Not fo' all de worl' let dem people hear it. Ef dey do, dis nigger am a dead man."

"Why, Bill, what's the matter? Why d'ye talk so mystereous? Is thar anythin' wrong? Oh, now I think o't! you're out from the quarter arter time. Never mind 'bout that; I'll not betray you. But what hev ye come for?"

"Foller me, Mass' Woodley; I tell yer all. I dason't tay hya, lees some ob dem folk see me."

You kum little way from de house, into de wood groun'; den I tell you wha' fotch me out. Dis nigga, Bill, hab somethin' to say to you berry patickler. Yes, Mass' Woodley, berry patickler. 'I am a t'ing ob life an' def.'

Woodley did not stay to hear more; but, lifting the latch, quietly pushed open the gate, and passed out into the road. Then following the negro, who flitted like a shadow before him, the two were soon standing under cover of some bushes, that formed a strip of thicket running along the road-side.

"Now, what air it?" asked Woodley of the coon-hunter, whom he well knew from having often met him in his midnight rambles.

"Mass' Woodley, you wants to know who kill Mass' Charl' Clancy?"

"Why, Bill, that's the very thing we're all talkin' 'bout, an' tryin' to find out. In coorse we want to know. But who is thar to tell us?"

"Dis nigga."

"Air ye in airnest, Bill?"

"So much in eariness dat I ha'n't got no chance go sleep till I hab reveal de secret. De ole ooman, neider. No, Mass' Woodley, Phoebe she no let me res till I do dat same. She say it am de duty ob a Christyun man, an', as ye know, we boaf belong to de Methodies. Darfore, I now tell ye, de man who kill Charl' Clancy wa' my own mass'r—de young un—Mass' Dick."

"Bill! are ye sure o' what ye say?"

"So shoo I kin sw'a' it as de troof, de whole troof, an' nuffin' but de troof."

"But what proof have ye?"

"De proof! I most see'd it wif ma own eyes. If I didn't see, I heerd it wif ma ears."

"By the 'tarnal! this looks like cl'ar evydence at last. Tell me, Bill, o' all that you see'd an' what you hearn?"

"Ya, Mass' Woodley, I tell you ebberyt'ing—all de sarkimstances c'neted wif de case."

In ten minutes after, Simeon Woodley was made acquainted with everything the coon-hunter knew; the latter having given him full details of all that had occurred on that occasion when his coon-chase was brought to such an unsatisfactory termination.

To the backwoodsman it was not a surprise. He had already arrived at a fixed conclusion, and Bill's revelation was in correspondence with it.

On hearing it, he but said—

"While runnin' off, your master let fall a letter, did he? You picked it up, Bill? Ye've got it?"

"Hya's dat eyedentikil dokymment."

The negro handed over the epistle, the photograph still inside it.

"All right, Bill! I reckon this oughter make things to'ably cl'ar. Now, what d'ye want me to do?"

"Lor', Mass' Woodley! You know bess. I'se needn't tell ye dat. Ef ole Eph'm Darke hear wha' dis nigga hab been an' gone an' dud, de life ob Blue Bill w'ldn't be wuth a ole coon-skin—no; not so much as a corn-shuck. I'se get de cowhide ebbery hour ob de day and de night, too. I'se get flog to def, sa'tin shoo."

"Y'ur right thar, I reckon," rejoined the hunter; and then continued, reflectively, "Yes; you'd be sarved putty sevore if they war to know on't. Wal, it mustn't be, and won't be—that I promise ye, Bill. Your evydence wouldn't count for anythin' in a law-court, nohow. Tharfor', we won't bring ye forrad; so don't you be skeeart. I guess we shan't want no more testimony, and thar ain't likely to be any cross-kwestenin' lawyers in the case. Now, d'ye slip back to y'ur quarters, and gi'e y'urself no furrer consarn. I'll see you shan't git into any trouble. Durned ef I don't!"

With this emphatic promise, the old deer and bear-hunter separated from the less pretentious votary of the chase; as he did so, giving the latter a squeeze of the hand, which told him he might go back in confidence to the negro-quarters and sit by the side of his Phoebe without fear.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONVINCING EVIDENCE.

WITH impatience the backwoods jury awaited the return of the backwoodsman. With impatience; for, before his leaving them, they had well-nigh resolved upon a verdict, with a sentence, and the mode of carrying it into execution. One after another had stepped across the threshold of the cottage, entered the chamber of death, and looked upon the corpse of Clancy's mother—whom they all regarded as having been murdered as much as her son.

And one as another, after gazing on that pale face, that seemed making its mute appeal to them for justice—for vengeance—came out muttering a vow, that there should be both: some loudly vociferating it, with the emphasis of an oath.

It did not now need what Simeon Woodley had in store to excite them to instant action. Already were they sufficiently inflamed. The furor of the mob, with all its maddened vengeance, had been gradually permeating their spirit, and had almost reached its culminating point.

Still had they sufficient calmness to keep them

patient a little longer, and hear what Woodley might have to say. They knew, or suspected, that he had been called from them on some matter connected with the subject under consideration. At such a time who would have dared interrupt their deliberations for any trivial purpose? Although none of them recognized Blue Bill's voice, adroitly disguised as it had been, they knew it was that of a negro. This, however, was no reason why the hunter should not have received some communication likely to throw fresh light on the affair. So, once more gathering around him, they demanded to know what it was; then respectfully listened.

He told them all he had heard, without making known who was his informant, or in any way compromising the brave fellow with a black skin, who had risked life itself by making disclosure of the truth.

To this the old hunter only referred in a slight manner. They all understood its significance, and none pressed him for more minute explanation.

"My informant," he said, after finishing the chapter of occurrences communicated by the coon-hunter, "has given me the letter dropped by Dick Darke, which, as I've tole ye, he picked up. Here it air. Perhaps it may throw some more light on the matter; though I guess you'll all agree wi' me that the thing's cl'ar enough a'ready."

They did all agree. A dozen voices had repeatedly declared, were still declaring that. Some now cried out:

"What need to talk any more? Charley Clancy's been killed—he's been murdered. Dick Darke's the man that did it!"

It was not from any lack of convincing evidence, but rather a feeling of curiosity, that prompted them to call for the reading of the letter, which the hunter now held conspicuously in his hand. Its contents might have no bearing on the case. Still there could be no harm in knowing what they were.

"You read it, Henry Spence! You're a scholar, an' I ain't," said Woodley, handing the letter over to a young fellow of learned look—the schoolmaster of the settlement.

Spence, stepping close up to the porch, into which some one had carried a candle, and holding the letter before the light, first read the superscription, which, as he told them, was in a lady's handwriting.

"To Charles Clancy," he said.

"Charles Clancy!"

Half a score of voices pronounced the name, all in a similar tone—that of surprise. One asked:

"Was that letter dropped by Dick Darke?"

"It was," said Woodley, to whom the question was addressed.

"Have patience, boys!" urged an elderly man. "Don't interrupt till we hear what's in it."

They all took the hint, and remained silent.

But when the envelope was laid open, and a photograph drawn out, showing the portrait of a young lady, recognized by all as a likeness of Helen Armstrong, there was a fresh outburst of exclamations betokening increased surprise; which became stronger still, when Spence read out the inscript upon the picture:

"HELEN ARMSTRONG, FOR HIM SHE LOVES."

The letter was addressed to Charles Clancy; to him the photograph must have been sent! A love affair between Miss Armstrong and the man who had been murdered! A new revelation to all present; astounding as significant!

"Go on, Spence! Give us the letter!" called an impatient voice.

"Yes, give us the letter! We're on the right track now, I reckon," added another.

The epistle was taken out of the envelope. The schoolmaster, unfolding it, read aloud:

"DEAR CHARLES: When we last met under the magnolia, you asked me a question. I told you I would answer it in writing. I now keep my promise, and you will find the answer underneath my own very imperfect image, which I herewith send inclosed. Papa has finally fixed the day of our departure from the old home. On Tuesday next we are to set out in search of a new one. Will it be as dear as that we leave behind? The answer will depend upon—need I say whom? After reading what I have written upon the carte, surely you can guess. There, I have confessed all—all woman can, could, or should. In six little words I have made over to you my heart. Accept them as its surrender!"

"And now, Charles, to speak of things more prosaic, as in this hard world we are constrained to do. On Tuesday morning—at a very early hour, I believe—a boat will leave Natchez, bound up the Red river. Upon it we travel as far as Natchitoches. There we are to remain for some time, while completing preparations for our further transport into Texas. Father is not certain what part of the 'Lone Star' State he will select for our future home. He speaks of a place upon some branch of the Colorado river, said to be a beautiful country; which you, having been out there, will know all about. In any case, we are to remain for a time—at least six weeks—in Natchitoches; and there, Carlos mio, I need not tell you, there is a post-office for receiving letters, as also for delivering them. Mind, I say for delivering them! Before we leave for the far frontier, where there may be neither post-office nor post, I shall write you full particulars about our intended 'location'—with directions how to find it. Need I be very minute? Or can I promise myself,

that your wonderful skill as a 'tracker,' of which we've heard, will enable you to discover it? They say Love is blind. I hope, dear Charles, yours will not be so; else you may not find the way to your sweetheart in the wilderness."

"How I go on talking, or rather writing, things I intended to say to you at our next meeting under the magnolia—our magnolia! Sad thought this, tagged to a pleasant expectation: for it must be our last interview under the dear old tree. Our last anywhere, until we come together in Texas—perhaps on some prairie where there are no trees. Well; we shall then meet, I hope, never to part; and in the open daytime, where we shall need neither night, nor tree shadows to conceal us. I'm sure father, humbled as he now is, will no longer object. Dear Charles, I don't think he would have done so at any time, but for his reverses. They made him think of—never mind what. I shall tell you all under the magnolia."

"And now, master mine—this makes you so—be punctual! Monday night, and ten o'clock—the old hour. Remember that next morning I shall be gone, long before the wild wood songsters are singing their 'reveille' to awaken you. Jule drops this into our tree post-office to-night—Saturday night. You have told me you go there every day. Then you will be sure of getting it in time; and once more I may listen to your flattery, as you quoted the old song about showing the night flowers their queen."

"Oh! Charles, how sweet that was, is, and ever will be to yours, HELEN ARMSTRONG."

"And that letter was found on Dick Darke?" questioned a voice, as soon as the reading had come to an end.

"It war dropped by him," answered Woodley; "and tharfor' ye may say it war found on him."

"You're sure of that, Simeon Woodley?"

"Wal, a man can't be sure o' a thing unless he sees it. I didn't see it myself wi' my own eyes. For all that, I've had proof cl'ar enough to convince me; an' I'm reddey to stan' at the back o' it."

"Dash the letter!" exclaimed one of the impatient ones, who had already spoken; "and the picter, too! Don't mistake me, boys. I ain't referrin' eyther to the young lady as wrote it, nor him she wrote to. I only mean that neither letter nor picter are needed to prove what we're all wantin' to know, an' do know. They arn't nor warn't required, nohow. To my mind, from the fust go off, nothin' ked be cl'arar than that Charley Clancy has been killed. 'cepting as to who killed him—murdered him, if ye will; for that's what's been done. Is there a man on the ground who don't know the name o' the murderer?"

The interrogatory was answered by a unanimous negative, followed by the name, "Dick Darke."

And along with the answer commenced a significant movement throughout the crowd. Threats were heard—some muttered, some spoken aloud—while men were observed looking to their guns, and striding toward their horses: as they did so, crying sternly, "To the jail! to the jail!"

In ten minutes after, these horses were in motion, with riders upon their backs, moving along the road between Clancy's cottage and the county town. They formed a cavalcade, if not regular in line of march, terribly imposing in aspect.

Could Richard Darke, inside the cell where he was confined, have seen these marching horsemen, heard their threats, and witnessed their excited gestures, he would have shaken in his shoes, and with a trembling worse than any ague the swamp could have given him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TO THE JAIL.

THE jail in which Richard Darke had been incarcerated was, as we have said, in the capital town of the county where the murder—if murder it was—had been committed.

In the old civilized countries of Europe the phrase "county town," or "capital of the county," presents an imposing idea. There rises before the fancy an array of streets, generally crooked, with several crossings, a market-house, one or more churches, and, it may be, a cathedral.

A county town in the Southern or South-western States of America need not suggest any parallel to this picture. True, some may show streets crossing, but never crooked; certainly the churches in more than the Old-World proportion; and indubitably a building of far greater pretension than the English town-hall or market-house.

This will be the "Court-House"—a structure almost peculiar to the American Republic, and forming a conspicuous feature in the national architecture; as it also plays an important part in the political life of the country.

I have no space, nor need it be my purpose, to depict an American court-house, or the many uses to which it is put. Sufficient to say that, notwithstanding its great size and pretentious style of architecture—sometimes the grandest Grecian, with Corinthian columns and swelling cupola—it frequently stands in the center of a town that could scarce claim to be called village—a mere collection of "weather-boarded" houses, suburbed by log cabins, not much better than huts.

The "Hotel" is the only other building in the place that dares look at the Court-House, and say, "I am a house as well as you."

In point of size and grandeur, it is justified in making this defiance; for in the smallest American town there is sure to be an "hotel" capable of bedding a hundred guests—if a Court-House town, two hundred—and dining them at the same table.

The reason for the county towns of the United States being thus often insignificant places is well understood. It is simply the result of a law—a sequence of Republican faith and fairness—that the political center of any district shall be placed in a central situation, territorially, so as to be equally accessible to all. This spot, however accommodating to legislators, is often the reverse for the convenience of its inhabitants, its commerce, and generally the industrial development of the place. The consequence is that the county town has a lively-deadly existence, remaining stagnant for a long period of time; its latest and only progress

der or some capital crime—could be shut up in a prison cell. For the detention of debtors, there was another and better style of chamber, in a remote corner of the Court-House.

It was close upon two o'clock A. M. on the morning after Dick Darke had been placed in confinement, when the troop of horsemen, already described, was seen approaching the county town by one of the roads that led to it. They were still riding straggled out, and irregularly, to all appearance without leader or any one commanding them. Notwithstanding this, there was an idea or purpose, that seemed to inspire and keep them in a sort of order. At all events, it carried them straight on, and with as much decision as though they were moving by the strictest military discipline.

When close up to the Court-House, and opposite the door of the jail, they halted without having received any word of command, though as promptly as if this had been given by the most martinet colonel.

And, on halting, every one of them leaped

had withdrawn to give a good opportunity! Or had he been warned of their approach, and, knowing their desperate design, forsaken his post through fear?

Whatever the reason, he was not there—neither he nor any one representing him. There was nothing to stay them in their intent. Nor was there any authority that could have done this. No power, not even the sheriff with his posse. At that moment it would have been dangerous for any man, or party of men, to have offered obstruction to the stern, determined officers whom Justice Lynch had deputed to carry out his decree.

From him they had the order to take Dick Darke from his prison, and hang him forthwith. No special place was mentioned. The nearest post, or tree-branch—for that matter, the swing sign of the hotel. Anywhere; so long as the criminal was executed.

With this resolve, fixed before their starting from Mrs. Clancy's cottage, and kept firm by frequent threats and angry ejaculations as they



"TO THE JAIL! TO THE JAIL!"—Page 17.

being that which it saw when first founded—when the Court-House was erected, and the half-score of frame-buildings, with the hotel, shot up simultaneously. The log cabins may have been there before.

Such a county town was that in whose jail Richard Darke had been lodged. A Court-House in the center, with plenty of open space around it; the "Hotel" standing opposite, a wooden structure, painted white, with an array of windows and green venetian shutters, numerous as in a spinning factory; twenty or thirty private dwellings, similarly limned; a livery stable; two or three stores; and a straggling suburb of "shanties" surrounded by a rank vegetation of "jimson weeds" and wild mayroyal. The county jail was a part of the Legislative building, situated in a sort of wing projecting from the main structure. There was but one room, or cell, devoted to this special purpose; for in the Southwestern States only a desperate criminal—a man committed for mur-

der or some capital crime—could be shut up in a prison cell. For the detention of debtors, there was another and better style of chamber, in a remote corner of the Court-House.

Thus they advanced toward the cell, in which the accused had been the day before shut up.

Three or four of them, some a little in advance of the others, who had already arrived at the door, were seen standing by it in attitudes and with looks that betokened surprise.

There should, then, have been a jailer to receive them. There was none!

So much the better, thought some; it would be all the easier to accomplish the purpose for which they had come.

This was to break open the prison door, drag out the incarcerated criminal, and hang him—without further trial, either by judge or jury. "Lynch" had already pronounced the sentence; they, his executive officers, were then, to carry it into execution.

Strange that the jail-keeper should not be at his post! Was he in connivance with them, and

journeyed along the road, they broke open the door of the prison, and rushed into the cell, where they knew, or supposed, the malefactor to be confined.

Some prudent ones remained by the door to prevent his egress. Others went inside to seize him.

The chamber was dark and silent. When a light had been struck, they saw that it was empty!

For once the decree of Judge Lynch remained null and void. Richard Darke, a sure assassin, had escaped from the vengeance of angry executioners.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CHOICE OF SONS-IN-LAW.

ABOVE two hundred miles from the mouth of Red river—the Red of Louisiana—stands the town of Natchitoches. The name is Indian, and to be pronounced as if written "Nak-e-tosh."

It is one of the oldest of Southwestern settlements—dating from the earliest attempts at Spanish and French colonization in the Mississippi valley; having at different periods been in possession of both nations; finally falling to the United States, at the transfer of the Louisiana territory, in 1803, by Napoleon Bonaparte.

For eighteen millions of dollars, which would not at the present time purchase a single parish in Louisiana State, Bonaparte, pressed for money, surrendered a tract of territory since transformed into several populous provinces—in fact, most of the North American continent between the Mississippi river and the Rocky Mountains: for it was through the cession of Louisiana that this became claimable by the Government of the United States.

From its early colonization by two distinct branches of the Latinic race, and its after-occupation by the commingling of many nationalities that compose the American people, the population of Louisiana presents to the ethnologist a study of peculiar interest—the negro and native Indian also forming an element in the amalgam.

In Natchitoches the traces of these varied types of humanity still exist, with many of the peculiar national customs appertaining to each: though not so distinctly marked as some twenty odd years ago, when it was the scene of certain incidents now to be recorded in our story. Then, was it a place fully deserving to be called *peculiar*; that is, when compared with most other American towns—especially those of the north. It was, in fact, only a large village; but as unlike a village on the Susquehanna, Hudson, Merrimac, or Connecticut, as a Swiss hamlet to a conglomeration of smoking factories in Massachusetts or Lancashire.

Standing upon a bluff of the Red river's bank, elevated many feet above the water surface, its painted wooden houses, built French fashion, with verandas—there called "piazzas"—and high-pitched roofs, its trottoirs brick-paved and shaded by trees of almost tropical foliage—conspicuous among them the odoriferous magnolia, and the *melia azedarach*, or "Pride of China"—these in places completely arcading the streets the town of Natchitoches offered the aspect of a *rus in urbe*, or *urbs in rure*, whichever way you may wish it. The porches and piazzas were entwined with creepers; here and there were stretches of trellis, along which meandered the cord-like tendrils of bignonias, aristolochias, and orchids, their flowers drooping over doorways, shutting out the too bright sunlight from windows, and filling the air with fragrance; while among them whirled the tiny humming-bird, buzzed the large humble-bee, or from one to another, on silent wing, flitted the butterfly. These were sights you saw at every turning, as you made promenade through the streets of Natchitoches.

And there were other sights equally gratifying to the eye. In these same trellised verandas you saw young girls of graceful mien, elegantly appareled, lounging in the open porches, or, perhaps, peering coyly through the half-closed jalousies, their eyes invariably dark brown or coal black, the marble forehead above them surmounted with a chevelure in hue resembling the plumage of the raven. For at that time most of the demoiselles of Natchitoches were descended from the old Latinic colonists—the Saxon blonde having scarce yet shown herself in the far Southwest.

Meet these same young ladies in the street, it was the custom, and *comme il faut*, to take off your hat, make a bow and pass on—of course without stopping. Every man who claimed to be a gentleman was expected to do this; and every woman, whether lady or not, if decently dressed, was treated to such deference. On which side or other the privilege might be supposed to lie, it was denied to none. The humblest shop clerk or artisan—even the dray-driver—might thus make obeisance to the proudest and daintiest damsel who trod the trottoirs of Natchitoches. It gave no right of converse, nor the slightest claim to acquaintanceship. A mere formality of politeness; and to presume carrying it further, would not only have been deemed a rudeness, but instantly, and perhaps very seriously, resented.

At the time spoken of there appeared upon the streets of this polished Southern town two young ladies, to whom hats were taken off with more than the usual alacrity, and bows made with an obsequiousness, as also an elaborate grace, that in many cases spoke of an inner prompting beyond mere politeness. The ladies in question were sisters, who had lately arrived in the place, and were staying at its principal hotel. There was no mystery in Natchitoches as to who they were, nor need there be any here. They had not been forty-eight hours in the town before every young "blood" belonging to it, and every planter or planter's son within a circuit of twenty miles, knew them to be the daughters of Colonel Archibald Armstrong—late of Mississippi State, and now on the way to establish himself in Texas.

The adverse fortunes of the Mississippi planter soon became equally well known; though, so far as his daughters were concerned, it need not have affected their future. For that matter

neither needed to go on into Texas. Before their father had been ten days in Natchitoches, he might have made choice of sons-in-law to the number of at least a dozen, all eligible; among them a member of Congress, two or three of the State Legislature, a couple of officers quartered at the nearest military post, with an assortment of planters, wealthy merchants, and men who made their living by the law.

These suitors were all rejected—all except one. The young planter, by name Louis Dupre, already spoken of as having laid siege to the heart of Jessie Armstrong, had finally stormed, and captured it. The most important question of his life had been asked; the answer of most importance, to hers, as well as his, had been given. Vows had been exchanged between them.

The younger daughter of Colonel Armstrong had not surrendered unconditionally. Before leaving the old home, she had promised her father she would not forsake him—at least not till they had become settled in their new one. Louis Dupre was told of this promise; and signified his assent to its conditions, in a way that not only met every obstacle, but made things mutually agreeable to himself and his future father-in-law. This he did, by proposing to accompany the latter into Texas, and bear a part in the fortunes of the projected settlement. The Creole planter could yield this point all the more easily, as, in common with many other Louisianians, he had already been turning his eyes toward that splendid territory, recently acquired from the Sister Republic of Mexico.

Dupre had triumphed over many rival aspirants to the affections of Jessie Armstrong; for many there had been.

They were few, however, compared with the host making suit to her who was to be his future sister-in-law. About Helen Armstrong the *jeunesse doree*—the "blooms"—of Natchitoches were, many of them, half mad. Within a week after her arrival, two or three duels were fought on her account, fortunately without fatal ending.

Not that she had given anyone the slightest cause, or cue, to be her champion. She had favored no one with even so much as a smile. On the contrary, she had met all their approaches with a denying indifference; while a cloud of melancholy seemed to brood almost continuously on her brow.

Anyone might have perceived that there was an *un verme rongeur*—a worm eating at her heart. Too plainly was she suffering from a passion of the past.

This did not dismay her Natchitoches adorers; nor hinder them from continuing their adoration. On the contrary, it only deepened it; her cold indifference setting their hot Southern hearts aflame—its very chillness but maddening them the more.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NEWS FROM NATCHEZ.

ABOUT ten days had elapsed since the arrival of Archibald Armstrong and his people in Natchitoches. The colonel had been, all the intervening time, engaged in getting up a party for his proposed colonization in Texas. A grand increase of strength had been gained, by the accession of Dupre, the betrothed of his daughter Jessie. The young planter possessed wealth in abundance, plenty of cash in hand, with a numerous belonging of slaves—these of all ages and shades of color, from negro-black to quad-roon-white. He had also stock and chattels in correspondence.

On the score of decadence, or bankruptcy, there was no necessity for him to break up his Louisiana home. This was only being done for the reasons already assigned—one of them being the condition imposed by his *fiancée*. On her part it was not caprice, nor was it called forth by any frivolous pretext. He knew this, and admired her all the more. He knew she was but keeping that vow made to her father, sacred as any oath, on the day when Richard Darke was rejected by her sister; and repeated on another day, when Ephraim Darke sent word to Archibald Armstrong, in the shape of a legal summons, to turn out from his home, forfeited by the foreclosing of the mortgage. Then, Helen Armstrong had once more made promise not to forsake her father; but to bear part in his misfortunes, until such time as he might recover from them; then Jessie, with equal zeal and like filial affection, had joined in the resolve. All this the latter had made know to her affianced, by way of excusing herself for what might otherwise have appeared a too harsh, or vexatious condition.

She had no need to have given the explanation. To the young Creole, love-entranced, any conditions would have seemed easy, so long as they made him sure that the blonde beauty was to be his. Besides, as we have said, he had already been casting his thoughts toward Texas; inspired by that restless peculiar to Western and Southwestern men—ever impelling them on, either southward or toward the setting sun.

Louis Dupre, moreover, had certain other ideas of his own, conceived in a spirit of ambition. He had traveled in Europe—in France—

with some of whose noblest families he held relationship, since from one of them was he descended. In Louisiana he was but a planter among planters. In Texas, where land was cheap, he had a dream of establishing himself on a grander scale, at least as regarded territory—in short, founding a sort of Transatlantic *seigneurie*.

For this, Colonel Armstrong would be no weak ally. The late Mississippian planter, though in reduced circumstances, was still held in high estimation. His character commanded respect, and would be sure to draw around him some of those strong, stalwart men of the backwoods, equally apt with ax and rifle, without whom no settlement on the far frontier of Texas would stand a chance of either security or success.

For it was to the far frontier they intended going, where land was still sold at Government prices—a dollar and a quarter—five English shillings the acre!

Now that Louis Dupre, the capitalist, had joined in it, the organization of the intended colony was easy enough, and Colonel Armstrong had but to superintend the preparations—the purchase of wagons, with their teams of mules or oxen; the engagement of teamsters and other attendants, and also some examination into the character and credentials of families proposing to be their fellow-colonists.

In these various duties, the colonel was thrown a good deal upon himself and his old campaigning experiences. Beyond the fact that his future son-in-law would be sure to provide the sinews of war, he received but slight assistance from him, either in planning the expedition or carrying out its details.

On his side, the careless Creole was too much engrossed with his golden-haired Jessie to give thought to anything else. She was the sunbeam in which he basked, and out of her presence he felt as if in shadow. Her absence was uncongenial to him, as night to the helianthus. Even in her company, if others were present, there was constraint to him, and perhaps also to her. Both liked being alone—*chez eux memes*—as Dupre, speaking his native language, used jestingly to say, when they had the good fortune of being by themselves.

As a consequence of this dual selfishness, Helen Armstrong was often left without company, or with only that of her mulatto maid, Julia. The girl observed the signs of grief visible on the brow, and pressing upon the heart of her young mistress. She could only guess at its cause; though she could do this with a good deal of certainty. Julia had been instructed to read; and, when she used to drop those scented billets-doux into the knot-hole of the magnolia, she not only knew them to be love-letters, but also the name of the man who was expected to take them from their place of deposit.

Of the last letter she had there carried, and what it had led to, her young mistress had not made her acquainted—even of as much as was known to herself. This was only what had been told her by Darke, at that ill-starred nocturnal encounter under the shade of the same magnolia.

The tragical incidents that took place afterward were, to the maid as to the mistress, altogether unknown. No news of them had as yet reached Natchitoches.

Not from these, then, came that deep melancholy, at times bordering on despair; and which the proud lady, stricken in her most sensitive part, endeavored to conceal, even from her slave, whom habit had taught her to regard as one would a wall, a tree, or a dumb animal.

But the mulatto girl, bondswoman though she was, possessed a heart brimful of affection—more especially for her whose waiting-maid she was. She had been deeply penetrated by the sorrow she saw weaving its spell round the life of her young mistress, threatening to destroy it. Julia had her own sorrows to endure—her lover left behind—she, and only one other, as she supposed, knew where. Jupiter, the runaway, of her own race, color, and kind, a slave like herself, was far away, in all likelihood still lurking in the dismal recesses of the swamp. But she was sustained by the hope, that he might yet escape from his difficulties, and rejoin her in a land where the dogs of Dick Darke would no longer be able to track him. Whatever might be the fate of the fugitive slave, she was sure of his devoted love for herself, and this was sufficient to keep her from despairing. Therefore, had she the strength and spirit to sympathize with her white mistress, whom she saw, day by day, endeavoring to bear up, but evidently sinking.

Julia could not look upon these signs without making an effort to ascertain the true cause. The time had come for knowing it. It was not curiosity, but a nobler sentiment, that prompted her.

Inspired by this, she entered the chamber of Helen Armstrong when the latter was alone. She carried in her hand that which she believed would give her the clue to her young mistress's melancholy. It might, perhaps, still further deepen it.

"See, Miss Helen!" she said, stepping across the room with an agitated air. "here's a Natchez

newspaper just come by the post. It has something in it, I'm sure will be news to you, but sad news, I fear."

The young lady stretched forth her hand and took hold of the newspaper—the *Natchez Courier*. Her fingers trembled as they closed upon the sheet. At the same time her eyes blazed up with a fierce jealous light. She expected to read among its marriage notices that of Charles Clancy with a Creole girl, whose name was unknown to her. It would be the latest chapter, the culminating point, of his life.

Oh! what a change came over her countenance, when, instead of his marriage, her eye rested upon a heading that proclaimed—*his murder!*

After that, change succeeded change in the glances of her eyes, the color of her cheeks, her air, attitude, everything, as, with palpitating heart and quick-beating breast, she drank in the details given by the newspaper—set, as they were, in conspicuous type.

The sadness had been enough, without the shame. Both together were beyond bearing; and the proud girl, hitherto sustained by an indignant jealousy, now gave way to a different emotion. Letting fall the paper upon the floor, she sunk back, into her chair, her heart wildly beating within her breast—threatening to beat no more.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SPECTERS IN THE STREET.

THE Natchitoches Hotel, at which Colonel Armstrong had put up before starting out on his expedition to Texas, was, as a matter of course, the principal one in the place. It would not have been proper for a planter—even a decayed one—to stay at a second-class house.

The first was far from splendid. Compared with one of the princely hostleries of the present day—set beside that, the princeliest of them all, the "Langham" of London—it would have appeared a hut alongside a palace.

the moonbeams shimmering through the lattice work showed they were both beautiful—of the two distinct styles, brunette and blonde. To be sure of this, it will be sufficient to say, they were Helen Armstrong and her sister Jessie.

On the faces of the two, thus differing in complexion, still more different was the expression. On Jessie's dimpled cheeks danced gladness, joy sparkling in her eyes of grayish-blue. For her the past had no sorrows, the future no fears. Her life was in the present—the bright, prosperous present. She dwelt upon the sunny side of the cloud, amidst its silver lining. She was at that moment expecting her lover, Louis. He had promised to come; and, with the instinct of a woman, knowing herself well loved, she had no fear of his disappointing her.

How different with her sister! Different in everything—memories of the past, thoughts of the present, forecasts for the future. The sheen of her raven hair, the somber shadow on her brow, her wan cheeks already beginning to show signs of wasting, the look of settled hope-



LETTING FALL THE PAPER UPON THE FLOOR, SHE SUNK BACK INTO HER CHAIR.—Page 20.

They told of the murder of Charles Clancy; of the arrest of Richard Darke, as the suspected murderer; and of the latter having been taken to the jail of the county town. There was nothing said of what had been done to him after—the paper having gone to press on the day of the arrest.

It contained, however, an account of the death of Clancy's widowed mother, and the consequent excitement throughout the settlement where these tragical events had taken place. Other details were given; and one paragraph of special, of terribly painful interest, to Helen Armstrong—holding her spell-bound as she read.

It is scarcely necessary to say, that this related to the letter she had herself written, addressed to Charles Clancy, and by Richard Darke abstracted from the tree.

Its contents were only given in epitome, as a copy of it had not reached the hands of the editor. But, even thus, they were compromising to her; fearfully humiliating, and she felt it.

Yet was it in every way comfortable. What it might lack in interior luxuriousness—as regarded upholstery and the like—was fully compensated by its outside adorning; these not owing aught to the architecture of the house, but all to the vegetation that surrounded and shadowed it. The native magnolia spread its broad laurel-like leaves against the painted wooden walls, while the exotic "Pride of China," rivaling the indigenous tree both in flower and fragrance, let fall its perfumed spikes against the green jalousies; as if courting admiration from those who sat within the chambers, into which were wafted its delicious odors.

On a still spring night, with a full moon coursing through southern skies, when the gleam of the fireflies could only be perceived under the darker shadow of the trees, two ladies might have been seen inside the vine-trellised veranda of the quaint, old-fashioned, wooden house, which was then the chief hotel of Natchitoches. The ladies in question were both young; and

lessness in her eyes, once so grandly, so imperiously glancing—all this was in contrast with the countenance of her sister.

She had reason for being sad. The disappointments, chagrins, sorrows that within a short period of time she had been called upon to endure, were enough to prostrate the proudest spirit, and bring it to a level with the earth.

And along with all these, thrown into the scale, was the shame of that letter, the contents of which would be scattered abroad, and known everywhere.

It was not of the letter she was now thinking. No. Little would she have cared for any humiliation it could have caused, had Charles Clancy been still alive. It was his death that was giving her the great grief—that, and a thought of the wrong she had done him. The two combined made up an agony lacerating her heart, almost cleaving it in twain.

"Cheer up, Helen! Cheer up, dear sister!"

Remember that many others have had to suffer the same as you."

These were the words of Jessie.

In response:

"No, never! Or, if many have, none to recover from it. How could they? We women, Jessie—true women, like you and myself—have out one love in our life. If we lose that, we can have no other, or none worth having. I have lost it, and care not to live an hour longer."

"No, no, no! Do not talk that way; you distress me, sister. Pray, do not speak so. Time will change everything—time and our new life in Texas. Your sadness will depart, and all will be well again. I feel sure of it. There is joy yet in store for you. There is, Helen! there is!"

"Never—for me, never!"

The chill, determined rejoinder had its effect. Jessie, awed by it, desisted from her attempt at consolation. She saw it was of no use just then, and a delicate instinct admonished her to postpone the task for a more favorable opportunity. Besides, she was then expecting her lover, who might make his appearance at any moment.

He had not yet entered the hotel. She knew this, for she had been watching the approaches to it, the street running right and left. At intervals she had been scanning it through the lattice-work, scrutinizing the street promenaders—herself unseen, screened by the leafy climbing-plants, the bignonias, with their bell-shaped flowers, and the odoriferous aristolochias.

Once more she placed herself at the post of observation, and looked along the street. She took note of every passenger that passed under the arcade of the China trees, endeavoring to identify a certain form and set of features. Only those of masculine gender were submitted to her scrutiny. To the women that went past, white or black, she scarce gave a glance. The men alone had any interest for her, and of them only one—Louis Dupre. So she believed, as, in the shadowy veranda, she stood awaiting him, thinking of no one else.

She was mistaken. Just at that moment some one else came in sight—one in whom she had an interest, or rather for whom she had a fear—something more, a feeling of repulsion.

It was a man of colossal size, who was seen silently gliding along the trottoir, under the shadow of the trees.

He stopped in front of the hotel, just opposite the veranda, and stood gazing at her, as she leaned over the baluster rail.

Even about this man's figure there was something forbidding—an expression of slouching brutality. But it was nothing, compared with the sinister cast seen upon his features, as they appeared under the light of a lamp that flared from the entrance-door of the hotel.

Jessie Armstrong, recognizing the face, did not stay to scrutinize it. The recognition was instantaneous, and caused her to tremble and shrink back. Quickly receding beyond eyesight from the street, she placed herself in a cowering attitude by the side of her sister.

"What's the matter, Jess?" asked Helen, observing her trayed aspect, and in turn becoming the comforter. "You've seen something to vex you? Something of—Louis?"

"No, no, Helen! Not him."

"Not him! Some one else? Who?"

"Oh, sister!" responded Jessie, "it's a man fearful to look at. A great big fellow with features that would frighten anyone. I've met him several times, when out walking alone. Every time I see him it sends a shiver through me. I cannot tell why."

"Has he been rude to you?"

"Not exactly rude, but certainly something like it. I might say impertinent. He stares at me in a strange way from under his broad-brimmed hat, pulled low over his eyes. And such eyes! They look hollow and horrid, like those of an alligator. I saw them just now, as he was passing, and stopped under the lamp-light. I believe he's standing there still."

"Let me have a peep at his alligator eyes. Perhaps I can give them such a look, in return, as for the future may make the fellow better keep his distance."

The fearless elder sister, more defiant through her very sadness, stepped forward to the veranda railing, and, leaning over it, looked down into the street.

She saw people passing—several men, but none that would answer to the description given by her sister.

One, however, came past, whose gait first, and then his figure, and after that his face, attracted her attention—attracted and strongly arrested it.

He, too, stopped in front of the hotel. Foolishly, if he had any occasion for concealing his face. Since, in the position he had assumed, the lamplight fell full upon it. Well might he have wished it otherwise: for in the countenance so presented Helen Armstrong identified features that exposed their owner to danger, while at the same time causing terror to herself.

She stood as if overpowered, fascinated by the sight. It was a strong, terrible emotion that held her so transfixed.

And only for an instant. Then, recovering herself, she retreated backward, intending to take counsel with her sister.

Jessie was no longer there. Her lover had meanwhile entered the hotel, and she had silently glided from the veranda to receive him.

In its shadow Helen was alone, appalled by the loneliness, her heart beating audibly within her breast.

And for some time she stood thus—despite her boasted courage, trembling. She, too, had been frayed by a specter in the street.

On scanning the piazza, she saw that there was no human figure in it, save her own. She had seen this on first stepping back, and only looked mechanically.

There was light enough to make discernible the outlines of a chair—the cane-seated rocking-chair of the States. Into this she sunk, without thought of its power of oscillation, or availing herself of it. On the contrary, she remained rigidly erect upon the seat, with the chair poised as upon a pivot, in balance.

Her thoughts were similarly concentrated; her hands clasped over her forehead, as if to keep them from scattering.

On stepping back from the balustrade, she had done so with a feeling of alarm, and a shiver throughout her frame. What she had seen was well calculated to cause both.

Both were over in an instant, her courage and coolness returning; along with them an impulse of anger.

Down in the street, at less than twenty paces distant, was the assassin of her lover—the man who had made her life desolate. There was he, after escaping from the prison in which his captors had confined, and so negligently guarded him. She had now the news of his escape, by a later mail that had arrived at Natchitoches.

She could have him re-arrested—could, should, and would. This was the resolve to which she came, after the first moment of confusion.

But how? At once cry "murderer!" and call upon the street passengers to seize him?

No. It would be the very way to give him a chance of getting off. Ere the cry could be responded to, he would be away into the woods, with sufficient start not to be easily overtaken. Around Natchitoches the thickest kind of timber, almost untouched by ax, came close up to the houses. Within a hundred yards of the outskirts, a man might plunge into the primeval forest—a fugitive find concealment in thicket and swamp.

Helen Armstrong was over twenty years of age; had been brought up in the backwoods, accustomed to western ways. Of enterprising spirit, like the pioneer stock from whom she was descended, reflective and inquiring, she also understood something of western wiles. She had the sense and *sang froid* to take the necessary steps for counteracting them. She saw that by raising an ill-judged outcry, she would be only giving the criminal a chance to escape from the justice he had already once baffled.

As he had not seen, or, at all events, not recognized her—she imagined this—there could be no need for any hurried action to prevent his leaving the place. Doubtless, he would be there for days. One, or less—half a day—an hour—would be enough to carry out the purpose that now shaped itself in her thoughts. This was to communicate what she had seen to her father, as also to Louis Dupre, leaving them to take steps for the re-arrest of the jail-breaker.

Then this she could not then have done more; for, on returning to look upon the street—her natural courage having overcome the fear that had for a moment overpowered her—she saw that the specter had disappeared. Concealed by the vine-laden trellis, she stood for some time gazing along the trottoir, scanning it in both directions as far as the lamps illuminated it. Far off, on the dim edge, where light became blended with darkness, she thought, or fancied, she could still trace the outlines of him, whom she knew to be the assassin of her lover.

Whether his or not, the man so observed was in the act of moving away. He was already too far off to be hounded with a "hue-and-cry," that would give any chance of overtaking, much less making capture of him.

But this Helen Armstrong had no longer thought of raising. She resolved on the other course of action, to carry out which she only waited for the return of her father, at the time absent from the hotel, and the disentanglement of Louis Dupre from his amorous dalliance with her sister.

"Where is the woman?" ("Ou est la femme?") was the first question asked by Talleyrand, when any knotty point of national policy was brought before him. The famed diplomatist knew, and acknowledged, he had no adversaries in his own line more difficult to deal with than women. Nor yet more frequently; since, according to his interrogatory, there was sure to be one at the bottom of every trouble—the *causa telletrima belli*.

Talleyrand's faith has not always been found true. In the case of Helen Armstrong, feminine diplomacy was destined to defeat. On seeing Richard Darke in the street, better had she at once shouted "murderer!" It might, perchance, have led to his re-arrest. As it was, the result was very likely to be different; since other eyes, besides hers, were engaging in a little bit of by-play, watching both. They were those de-

scribed by her sister as resembling the eyes of alligators.

The owner of them, after what he had seen, came to certain conclusions; these being such, that he stole silently away from the spot, determined to put the assassin upon his guard.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE "CHOCTAW CHIEF."

"You'll excuse me, stranger, for interruptin' you in the readin' o' your newspaper. I like to see men in the way o' acquirin' knowledge. But we're all of us here goin' to take a drink. Won't you join?"

The invitation, rudely if not uncourtously extended, came from a man of middle age, who stood at least six feet three, without counting the thick soles of a pair of horseskin boots—the tops of which rose several inches above his knees. He was a person rawboned and generally of rough exterior, wearing a blanket coat; his trousers tucked into the aforesaid boots, with a leather belt round his waist, under the coat, but over the haft of a bowie-knife, alongside which peeped out the brass butt of a Colt's revolving pistol—army pattern. In correspondence with this paraphernalia of clothing and equipment, he showed a cut-throat countenance, typical of the State Penitentiary; cheeks blotted as from excessive indulgence in drink; eyes watery and somewhat bloodshot; lips thick and sensual; with a nose set obliquely, looking as if it had received hard treatment in some pugilistic encounter. His hair was of a yellowish clay color, of lighter tint over the eyebrows. There was none either on his lips or jaws, nor yet upon his thick hog-like throat, which seemed as if some day it might stand in need of something stiffer than a beard to protect it from the noose of the hangman.

He, to whom the invitation had been extended, was of quite a different appearance; not a whit less repulsive, only that the repellent points were mental or moral, rather than physical. In age he was not much over half that of the individual who had addressed him—twenty-five perhaps—of dark complexion, tint cadaverous; the cheeks haggard, as if from sleepless anxiety; the upper lip showing elongated bluish blotches, as from a pair of mustaches recently removed; the eyes coal black, with a sinister glance, sent with suspicious furtiveness from under a broad hatrim pulled low down over the brow. His figure might have been well enough, but for garments somewhat coarse and clumsily fitting; too ample both for body and limbs, as if intended to conceal these, rather than show them to advantage.

A practiced detective, after scanning this individual, taking note of his habiliments, especially his hat and the manner of wearing it, would have pronounced him a person dressed in disguise—a disguise, for some strong reason, adopted. A thought, or suspicion, of this kind appeared to be in the mind of the rough Hercules who had invited him to drink; though he was no detective.

"Thank you," said the young fellow, lowering the newspaper to his knee, and raising the rim of his hat as little as possible. "I've just taken a drink. I hope you'll excuse me."

"No; durned if we do! Not this time, stranger. The rule o' this tavern is, that all in the bar takes a 'smile' together—leastwise on first meetin'. So, say what's to be the name o' yer licker."

"Oh! in that case I'm agreeable," rejoined the newspaper reader, laying aside his reluctance, and along with it the paper—at the same time getting upon his feet. Then, stepping up to the bar, he added, in a tone of seeming frankness:

"Phil Quantrell ain't the man to back out where there's glasses going. But, gentlemen, as I'm the stranger in this crowd, I hope you'll let me pay for the drinks."

The men thus addressed as "gentlemen" were seven or eight in number; not one of whom, from external appearance, could lay claim to the epithet. So far as this went, they were all fit company for the brutal-looking bully in the blanket-coat who had opened the conversation. Had Phil Quantrell addressed them as "blackguards" he would have been nearer the mark. Villainous scoundrels they appeared, one and all: though of different degrees as to scoundrelism in their countenances, and with a like variety of villain semblance in their costumes.

"No—no!" shouted several, determined to prove they were at least gentlemen in generosity. "No stranger can stand treat here. You must drink with us, Mr. Quantrell."

"This score's mine," said the first spokesman, in an authoritative voice. "After that anybody as likes may stand treat. Come, Johnny! trot out the stuff. Brandy smash for me."

The barkeeper thus appealed to—as repulsive-looking as any of the party upon whom he was called to wait—with that dexterity peculiar to his craft, soon furnished the counter with bottles and decanters containing several kinds of liquors. After which he set a row of tumblers alongside, corresponding to the number of those designing to drink.

And soon they were all drinking; each having chosen the tippie most preferred by his palate.

It was a scene of every-day occurrence, every hour, almost every minute, in a tavern bar-room of the Southern United States; the only peculiarity in this case being, that the tavern in which it took place was very different from the ordinary village inn, or roadside hotel. It stood upon the outskirts of Natchitoches, in a suburb known as the "Indian quarter;" sometimes also called "Spanish town"—both names having reference to the fact, that the queer cabin cottages around were inhabited by pure-blooded Indians and half-breeds, with poor whites of Spanish extraction—the last being degenerate descendants of those who had originally colonized the place.

The tavern itself, bearing an old weather-washed swing-sign, on which had once been depicted an Indian in full war-paint, was known as the "Choctaw Chief." It was kept by a man supposed to be a Mexican, but might have been anything else; who had for his barkeeper the aforementioned "Johnny," a personage sup-

Such was the reputation of the hostelry, at whose drinking bar stood Phil Quantrell—so calling himself—with the men to whose boon companionship he had been so brusquely introduced; as their chief spokesman said, according to the custom of the establishment.

The first drink swallowed, Quantrell called for another round; and then a third was ordered, by some one else, who paid, or promised to pay, for it.

A fourth "smile" was insisted upon by another some one who said he would pay for it; all the liquor, up to this time consumed, being either cheap brandy or "rot-gut" whisky.

Quantrell, now fairly in his cups, and acting under the generous impulse they had produced, sung out, "Champagne!"—a wine which the poorest tavern in the Southern States, even the Choctaw Chief, could plentifully supply.

After that the choice vintage of France, or its gooseberry counterfeit, flowed freely; Johnny showing no reluctance in stripping the silver

lasse;" while still others, at intervals, and rather as if by a slip of the tongue, gave him the title "Captain."

Jim, Mister, or Captain Borlasse—whichever designation he deserved—throughout the whole debauch, kept his bloodshot eyes fixed upon their new acquaintance, and watched his every movement. His ears, too, were open to catch every word Quantrell uttered, weighing well its import.

For all this, he said, or did, nothing to show he was thus attentive to the stranger—as first his guest, but now a spendthrift host to him and his party.

While the champagne was being freely quaffed, of course there was much conversation, and on many subjects. But one became special; seeming more than all others to engross the attention of the roysterers under the roof of the Choctaw Chief.

It was a murder that had been committed in the State of Mississippi, near the town of Nat-



"YOUR NAME IS NOT PHILIP QUANTRELL: IT IS RICHARD DARKE!"—Page 23.

posed to be an Irishman, but of like dubious nationality.

The Choctaw Chief took in travelers; giving them bed, board, and lodging. It usually had a goodly number under its roof; though they were travelers of a peculiar kind—strange both in aspect and manners—no one knowing when or whence they came, or at what time or whither bent, when they took their departure.

As the house stood out of the ordinary path of town promenaders, in an outskirt scarce ever visited by respectable people, no one cared to inquire into the character of its guests, or aught else relating to it. To those who chanced to stray in its direction, it was known as a sort of cheap hostelry, that gave shelter to all sorts of queer customers—hunters, trappers, small Indian traders, returned from an expedition on the prairies; and along with these, such travelers as were without means to stop at the more pretentious inns of the village; or, having the means, preferred, for reasons of their own, to put up at the Choctaw Chief.

necks, twisting the wire, and letting fly the corks. For the stranger guest had taken a purse from his pocket, which all could see was "chock full" of gold "eagles," some observing—but saying nothing about—the singular contrast of this wealth with the cheap coarse attire upon his person.

After all not much. Within the wooden walls of the Choctaw Chief there had been seen many a contrast quite as curious. Neither its hybrid landlord, nor his barkeeper, nor its guests were likely to take note—or, at all events, make remarks upon—many circumstances which elsewhere would have seemed singular.

Still was there one among the roystering crowd who took note of this; as also of other acts done, and sayings spoken, by Phil Quantrell in his cups. This was the Colossus who had introduced him to the jovial company, and who still stuck to him as his chaperon.

Some of this man's associates, who appeared on familiar footing, called him "Jim Borlasse;" others, less free, addressed him as "Mister Bor-

chez; an account of which had just appeared in the local journal of Natchitoches. The paper was lying on the tavern table; and all of them who could read had already made themselves acquainted with the particulars of the crime. Those, whose scholarship did not extend so far, had learnt them at second-hand from their better-educated associates.

The murdered man was called Clancy—Charles Clancy—while the murderer, or he under suspicion of being so, was named Richard Darke, the son of Ephraim Darke, a rich Mississippi planter.

The paper gave further details: that the body of the murdered man had not been found before the time of its going to press; though the evidence collected left no doubt of the foul deed having been done; adding, that Darke, the man accused of it, after being arrested and lodged in the county jail, had managed to make his escape—through connivance with his jailer, who had also disappeared from the place. The paragraph likewise mentioned the motive for the

committal of the crime—at least, as it was supposed or conjectured; giving the name of a young lady, Miss Helen Armstrong, and speaking of a letter and picture dropped by the suspected assassin. It wound up by saying, that no doubt both prisoner and jailer had G. T. T.—“Gone to Texas”—a phrase at that time of frequent use in the States—applied to fugitives from justice. It wound up by giving the copy of a proclamation from the State authorities, offering a reward of two thousand dollars for the apprehension of Richard Darke, and five hundred dollars for Joe Harkness—this being the name of the conniving jail-keeper.

While the murder was being canvassed and discussed by the drinkers in the bar-room of the Choctaw Chief—a subject that seemed to have a strange fascination for them—Borlasse, who had become elevated with the alcohol, though usually a man of taciturn habit, broke out with an asseveration that caused surprise to all, even his more intimate associates.

“Curse the luck!” he vociferated, bringing his fist down upon the counter till the decanters danced under the concussion; “I’d ‘a’ given a hundred dollars to ‘a’ been in the place o’ that fellow Darke, whoever he is!”

“Why?” interrogated several of his confreres. “Why, Jim?” “Why, Mr. Borlasse?” “Why, Captain?”

“Why?” echoed the man of many titles, again striking the counter, and causing decanters and glasses to jingle. “Why? Because that Clancy—that same Clancy—is the skunk that, before a packed jury, half o’ them yellar-bellied Mexikins, in the town of Nacogdoches, swore I stole a horse from him. Not only swore it, but war believed; an’ got me—me, Jim Borlasse—tied for twenty-four hours to a post, and whipped into the bargain. Yes, boys, whipped! An’ by a low Mexikin nigger, under the orders o’ one o’ their constables, they call algazeels. I’ve got the mark o’ them lashes on me now, and can show them, if any o’ ye hev’ a doubt about it. I ain’t ‘shamed to tell you fellows; as ye all know what it means, I guess. But I’m burnin’ mad to think that Charley Clancy’s escaped clear o’ the vengeance I’d sworn again’ him. I knew’d he was comin’ back to Texas, him and his. That’s what took him out thar when I met him in Nacogdoches. I war waitin’ and watchin’ till he shed come this way. Now, it appears, somebody has spoilt my plans—somebody o’ the name of Richard Darke. An’, while I envy this Dick Darke, I say curse him for doin’ it!”

“Curse Dick Darke! Curse him for doin’ it!” rung out the chorus of roysterers, till the walls of the Choctaw Chief re-echoed the blasphemous acclaim.

The drinking debauch was continued till a late hour, Quantrell paying shot for the whole party. Maudlin as most of them had become, they still wondered that a man so shabbily dressed could command so much cash and coin. Some of them were no little perplexed by it.

Borlasse was, perhaps, less so than any of his companions. He had noted certain circumstances that gave him the explanation; one, especially, that seemed to make everything clear. As the stranger, calling himself Phil Quantrell, stood by his side, champagne glass in hand, he took out a pocket-handkerchief to wipe the wine from his lips. The handkerchief fell upon the floor, Borlasse picking it up, but without restoring it to its owner.

He did so, after a time; but not till he had made himself acquainted with a name embroidered on one of its corners.

When, at a late hour, the two sat together, drinking a last good-night draught, Borlasse placed his lips close to the stranger’s ear, and said, in a whisper:

“Your name is not Philip Quantrell: it is Richard Darke!”

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MURDERER UNMASKED.

HAD a rattlesnake sounded its harsh “skirr” under the chair on which the stranger was sitting, he could not have shown more alarm, or started up more abruptly, than he did when Borlasse said:

“Your name is NOT Philip Quantrell: it is Richard Darke!”

For Richard Darke in reality it was.

He first half rose from his seat: then sat down again; all the while trembling in such fashion that the wine went over the edge of his glass, wetting the sanded floor of the bar-room.

Fortunately for him, the rest of the company had retired to bed, it being now a very late hour of the night—near midnight. The drinking “saloon” of the Choctaw Chief was quite emptied of its inebriated guests—the two principal entertainers alone staying. Even Johnny, the barkeeper, had gone kitchenward—in all likelihood to look after his supper.

Otherwise the startled demeanor of the gentleman hitherto figuring as Phil Quantrell would have attracted eyes upon and perhaps brought around him an inquisitive crowd.

As it was, there was only Borlasse to bear witness to the effect of his own speech; which, though but whispered, had proved so significantly startling.

The speaker, on his side, showed no surprise. Throughout all the evening he had been taking the measure of his man, and had arrived at a full comprehension of the case. He saw that he was in the company of Charles Clancy’s murderer. The disguise that Darke had adopted—the mere shaving off his mustache and putting on a dress of home-woven “cottonade”—the common wear of the Louisianian Creoles—with a broad-brim palmetto hat to correspond, was too thin, too flimsy, to deceive a man like Borlasse, himself accustomed to travesties and metamorphoses far more ingenious. To have appeared in keeping with his coarse garb, Darke should have shown less free of his golden coin. Though it might not have much mattered. The man into whose company he had chanced—like himself a traveler staying at the Choctaw Chief—would have seen through the thickest mask he could have assumed. It was not the first time for Jim Borlasse to meet a murderer fleeing from the scene of his crime—stealthily, disguisedly making his way toward the boundary line, between the United States and Texas—toward the Sabine river, then the limit of executive justice.

“Come, Mr. Darke,” he said, extending his arm in a gesture of reassurance, “don’t waste the wine in that ridiculous fashion. You and I are alone, and I reckon we understand one another. If not, we’ll soon come to do so—the sooner by your puttin’ on no nonsensical airs, but tellen’ me the clear and candid truth. First, then, answer me the questyun: Air you, or air ye not, Richard Darke? If ye air, don’t be afeerd to say it. No humbuggery, now! That won’t do for Jim Borlasse.”

The disguised assassin, still trembling, for a moment hesitated to make reply.

Only for a moment. He saw it would be of no use denying his identity. The man who had questioned him—of colossal size and ruffian aspect—notwithstanding the copious draughts he had swallowed during the night, seemed cool as a tombstone, and stern as an inquisitor. The bloodshot eyes, watery though they were, looked upon him with a leer that said: “Tell me a lie, and I’ll be your enemy, even to stabbing you, some time, in the dark, or shooting you down, now, upon the spot.”

At the same time those horrid eyes spoke of safety; if the truth were told, of friendship; such friendship as may be felt between two criminals equally steeped in crime.

The assassin of Charles Clancy—now for many days and nights wandering the earth, a fugitive from foiled justice, taking untrodden paths, hiding in holes and corners, at last seeking shelter under the roof of the Choctaw Chief because of its repute for harboring such as he—seemed at length to have reached the true haven of safety.

So thought he himself, after listening to the appeal of his boon companion, and gazing into the eyes of the man, as he made it.

The volunteered confessions of Borlasse—the tale of his hostility to Charles Clancy and its cause—were enough to give Darke confidence about any revelations he might make in return. Beyond all doubt his new acquaintance stood in mud, deep as himself. Without further hesitation, he said:

“I am Richard Darke.”

“All right!” was the reply. “And now let me tell you, I like your manly way of answerin’ the question I put ye. Same time, I may as well remark, ‘twould ‘a’ been all one if ye’d said no! This child hain’t been hidin’ half o’ his life, ‘count o’ some little mistakes made at the beginnin’ of it, not to know when a man’s got into a sim’lar fix. First day you showed your face inside the Choctaw Chief I see’d thar war something amiss; tho’, in course, I couldn’t gi’e the thing a name, much less know ‘twar that ugly word which begins with a M. This evenin’, I acknowledge I war a bit put out—seein’ you round thar by the hotel, spyin’ after one of them Armstrong girls; which of them I needn’t say.”

Darke started, muttering mechanically: “You saw me there?”

“In course; how could I help it—bein’ there myself, on the same errand, I suppose?”

“Well?” interrogated Darke, waiting for the other to proceed.

“Well; that, as I’ve said, some leetle bamboozled me. From your looks and ways since you first came hyar, I guessed that something wrong must be different from a love scrape. Besides, a man stayin’ at the Choctaw Chief, and sportin’ the cheap rig as you’ve got on wa’n’t likely to be aspirin’ to sech dainty damsels as them. You’ll give in, yourself, it looked a leetle queer, didn’t it?”

“I don’t know that it did,” was the reply, pronounced doggedly, and in an assumed tone of devil-may-careishness.

“You don’t! Well, I thought so, up to the time o’ gettin’ back to the tavern hyar—not many minutes afore my meetin’ and askin’ you to jine us in drinks. If you’ve any curiosity to know what changed my mind, clearin’ up the whole thing, I’ll tell ye.”

“What?” asked Darke, scarcely reflecting on his words.

“That ‘ore newspaper you war readin’ when I

gave you the invite. I read it afore you did, and had ciphered out the whole thing. Puttin’ six and six thegither, I could easy make the dozen. The same bein’, that one of the young ladies stayin’ at the hotel is the Miss Helen Armstrong spoke of in the paper; and the man I observed watchin’ her is Richard Darke, who killed Charles Clancy—yourself!”

“I—I am—I won’t, I don’t deny it to you, Mr. Borlasse. I am Richard Darke. I did kill Charles Clancy, though I do deny having murdered him.”

“Never mind that. Between friends, as I suppose we can now call ourselves, I don’t like no nice distinguishin’ of terms. You war manslaughter, it’s all the same, whether you has a motive sech as yours. An’ when I hear you out o’ the pale of what they call a gentleman, hunted from the settlements, I’s not likely to lose the respect of them who’s been served the same way. Your bein’ Richard Darke an’ havin’ killed Charles Clancy, in no ways makes you an enemy o’ Jim Borlasse—except in your havin’ robbed me of a revenge I’d sworn to take myself. Let that go now. He’s dead; and buried, I s’pose, by this time. I ain’t angry, but only envious o’ you, for havin’ the satisfaction of sendin’ the skunk to kingdom come, without givin’ me the chance. An’ now, Mister Darke, what do you intend doin’?”

The question came upon the assassin with a sobering effect. His copious potations had hitherto kept him from reflecting. It was only on his boon companion clearly showing a knowledge of his identity, that he felt a renewal of his fears; though they were soon after tranquilized by the “thieves’ confidence” with which Borlasse now inspired him.

The interrogatory relating to his future again brought its darkness, with all its dangers, before him; and he paused before making response.

Without waiting for it, his questioner continued:

“If you’ve got no fixed plan of action, and will listen to the advice of a friend, I’d advise you to become one o’ us.”

“One of you! What does that mean, Mr. Borlasse?”

“Well; I can’t tell you here,” rejoined Borlasse, in a subdued tone. “Desarted as this bar-room appears to be, it’s got ears for all that. I see that curse, Johnny, creepin’ at out, pretendin’ to be lookin’ after his supper. If he knew as much about you as I do, you’d be in limbo afore you ked get into your bed. I needn’t tell you thar’s a reward offered; for you see’d that yourself in the newspaper. Two thousand dollars for you, an’ five hundred dollars for the fellow as I’ve see’d along wi’ you, and who I’d already figured up as bein’ jailer Joe Harkness. Johnny, an’ a good many more, would be glad to go halves with me for tellin’ them only half of what I now know. I ain’t goin’ to betray you. I’ve my reasons for not doin’ so. After what I’ve said, I reckon you can trust me.”

“I can,” answered the assassin, heaving a sigh of relief.

“All right, then,” said Borlasse; “we understand one another. But it won’t do to stay talkin’ here any longer. Let’s go up to my bedroom. We’ll be safe there; and I’ve got a bottle of brandy, the best stuff for a nightcap. Over that we can talk things straight, without anyone having the chance to set them crooked. Come along!”

Darke, without protest, responded to the invitation. He dared not do otherwise. It sounded more like a command. The man extending it had now full control over him—could at any moment deliver him up to justice—have him dragged to a jail.

Without another word, he followed Borlasse to his bedroom.

CHAPTER XXX.

“WILL YOU BE ONE OF US?”

AS soon as the stalwart ruffian had entered his sleeping-apartment, pointed out a chair to his invited guest, and planted himself upon another—with the promised bottle of brandy between them—he resumed speech.

“I’ve asked you, Mr. Darke, to be one o’ us. I’ve done it for your own good, as you ought to know without my tellin’ ye. Well; you asked me in return what that means; didn’t ye?”

“Yes, I did,” said Darke, answering without any definite idea or purpose.

“It means, then,” continued Borlasse, taking a gulp out of his glass, “that me, an’ the others you’ve been drinking with, air as good a set of fellows as ever lived. That we’re a cheerful party, you’ve seen for yourself. What’s passed this night ain’t now heres to the merry times we spend upon the prairies out in Texas—for it’s in Texas we live.”

“May I ask, Mr. Borlasse, what business you follow?”

“Well, when we’re engaged in business, that’s mostly horse-catchin’. We rope wild horses, or mustangs, as they’re called, an’ sometimes them that ain’t jest so wild. We bring them into the settlements for sale. For that reason we go under the name of ‘mustangers.’ Between whiles, when business isn’t very brisk, we speck

our time in some of the Texas towns—they what's well in to'rds the Grand river, whar there's a good sprinklin' of Mexikins in the population. We've some rare times among the Mexikin girls, I can assure you. You may take Jim Borlasse's word for that, mayn't you?"

"I have no reason to doubt it," answered Darke.

"Well, I needn't say more, need I? I know you're fond of a pretty face, with black eyes in it. You'll get both among the saynoritas, to your heart's content. Enough, maybe, to make you forget the pair I saw glancin' on you out of the hotel gallery."

"Glancing on me?" exclaimed Darke, showing surprise, not unmixed with alarm.

"Glancing on you; right on ye."

"You mean—"

"I mean Miss Helen Armstrong's eyes; the same that made you do that little bit of shootin', with Charles Clancy for a target."

"Do you think she *saw* me?" asked the assas-

lasse, "an' you've made up your mind to keep Miss Armstrong in sight, you won't be likely to live long. As sure as you're sittin' thar, afore breakfast-time to-morrow mornin' the town of Naketosh 'll be too hot to hold ye."

Darke started up from his chair, as if it had become too hot to remain seated on.

"Keep cool, Phil Quantrell!" apostrophized the Texan. "No need for ye to be alarmed now. There would be, if you were in that chair, or this room, eight hours later. I won't be myself, not six. For I may as well tell ye that Jim Borlasse, like yourself, has reasons for shiftin' quarters from the Choctaw Chief. He'll be gone a good hour afore sun-up. An' he gives you a friend's advice, to make tracks along wi' him. Will you go?"

Darke even yet hesitated to give an affirmative answer. His love for Helen Armstrong—wild, wicked passion though it might be—was the controlling power of his life. The thought of leaving her behind—separating from the

done it—they blue eyes of hers; danged if they hain't! Then, do you suppose that I'm goin' to run away from, and lose sight o' her and them! No; not till I've had her within these arms, and tears out o' them same peepers droppin' on my cheeks. That is, if she take it in the weepin' way."

"I don't understand," stammered Darke.

"You will in time," rejoined the ruffian; "that is, if you come with us, and go where we're goin'. Enough now for you to be told that, *there you will find Helen Armstrong!*"

Without waiting to watch the effect of his last words, the tempter continued:

"Now, Richard Darke, are you willing to be one of us?"

I "am!"

It was late when Colonel Armstrong returned to his hotel, and Louis Dupre became disengaged from his *te-te* with Jessie. Then they were told of the specters seen in the street; but too



CLANCY AT HIS MOTHER'S GRAVE.—Page 26.

sin, with evidently increasing uneasiness, and without waiting for the conclusion of the other's speech.

"Think! I'm sure of it. More than saw—she recognized ye. I could tell that from the way she shot back into the shadow. Did ye not notice it yourself?"

"No," answered Darke, the monosyllable issuing mechanically from his lips, while a fresh chill ran through his frame.

His questioner, observing these signs, said:

"Take my advice, and come with us fellows to Texas. Before you're long there, the Mexikin girls will make you stop moping about Miss Armstrong. After the first *fandango* you've been at, you won't care a straw for her. Believe Jim Borlasse, when he tells ye you'll soon forget her."

"Never!" exclaimed Darke, in the fervor of his passion—thwarted though it had been—forgetting the danger he was in.

"If that's your determination," returned Bor-

place in which she stayed, perhaps never to see her again—this thought was more repugnant, more dominating, than that peril which plainly stared him in the face—the specter of a scaffold!

The Texan ruffian guessed the cause of his irresolution. More than this, he understood and knew he had the means to put an end to it. A word would be sufficient; or, at the most, a single speech. He spoke it thus:

"If you're determined to stick by the apron-strings o' Miss Helen Armstrong, you'll not do that by staying here in Naketosh. Your best place, to be near her, will be along with me."

"How so, Mr. Borlasse?"

"You ought to know without my tellin' you—a man of your 'cuteness, Quantrell! You say you can never forget the oldest of that pair o' girls. I believe you, and will be candid, too in sayin'—no more is Jim Borlasse likely to forget the youngest. I thought nothin' could 'a' fetched that soft feelin' over me. 'Twa'n't likely, after what I've gone through in my time. But she's

late to take any steps that night for the re-capture of Charles Clancy's murderer. Neither was personally concerned in the affair, beyond the common duty of assisting justice. And, after taking counsel together, they concluded to let the matter remain over till morning.

Imprudent determination—fatal to the end in view! Before the morning sun rose over the roofs of the Natchitoches, Richard Darke, along with several other guests of the Choctaw Chief, had taken departure from the place.

The assassin had a second time escaped.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A CHEERLESS SETTLEMENT.

SEVERAL weeks had elapsed since the murder of Charles Clancy, and the escape of the man accused of it from the jail in which he had been lodged.

Although the excitement had to some extent subsided, the people of the neighborhood, n-

which these events had occurred, still continued to talk of them. Not that either the crime, or the escape of the criminal, were any longer regarded as mysterious. About the death itself there could be no uncertainty; the traces found left no doubt of Clancy being dead. Almost equally certain was it that he had been killed—murdered; the same traces pointing out a murderer. The circumstantial evidence of bullets, bullet-holes and boot-tracks, coupled with the strange behavior of Clancy's dog, had been greatly strengthened—in fact, confirmed—by the letter of Helen Armstrong, with its inclosure. It was known that Darke had dropped it while retreating from the scene of his crime. He must have taken it from the body of the murdered man, or previously intercepted it. In either case his deed was all the darker; though the letter threw a clear, unmistakable light on its motive—making this comprehensible to everyone.

These circumstances were not all known throughout the neighborhood. Some of them were still the secrets of Simeon Woodley, and a few others to whom he had intrusted them. The backwoodsman had reasons for keeping them—among others, his promise given to the brave coon-hunter, who had risked so much for the sake of right and justice.

Woodley had loyally kept his word; and, as Blue Bill's generous behavior, in volunteering his testimony, never reached the ears of Ephraim Darke, the slave was not compromised with his cruel master, and received no more than the customary amount of castigation. Now, indeed, less. The disgraced father, stricken with sorrow as with shame—it is to be hoped also with repentance—while concealing his face, raised his head less proudly among his sable-skinned helots; for a time, at least, treating them with humanity. When the forest is on fire, or under flood, the timid deer is safe beside the ravenous wolf which has sought the same place of refuge.

Woodley had less difficulty in screening the coon-hunter, on account of the turn events had taken. As no dead body had been found, there could be no inquest of coroner—no formal investigation as to whether Clancy had been foully dealt with. And, as the doer of the deed—or he suspected of doing it—was no longer in the hands of justice, no trial could take place; as none did.

There was not any mystery about Darke's escape from the prison; not even about the mode of his making it. A few hours after his being incarcerated his father had been permitted to see him in his cell. To a planter of such standing—an afflicted parent as well—this privilege could not be refused.

But Ephraim Darke was also a man of wealth; and gold; at all times and in all countries, has been known to make mysteries, or circumstances resembling them.

In this case there was not even the resemblance. When the jury of Judge Lynch entered the cell and found it empty, all was explained. It had already been suspected when they found no gaoler at the door. Most of them knew this official to be a fellow of very indifferent repute; his evil doings of late being so notorious that there had been talk of discharging him. Luckily for Ephraim Darke, as for his son, this idea had not been carried out.

The doubted officer dwelt in a cabin close to the jail. Not finding him at his post, his domicile had been visited by the crowd, calling for vengeance. It, too, was found without a tenant!

The baffled lynchers at once perceived how things stood. They scarce needed to be told that, during the day, Ephraim Darke had obtained permission to enter the prison. At once came the conviction to all, that a golden key had laid open its lock, and that keeper and prisoner had gone off together.

So far, there was nothing to cause surprise, any more than about the most ordinary of murders, and the simplest of jail-breakings.

The first could only be regarded as a little romantic, on account of the motive made manifest by Helen Armstrong's love-letter and her likeness. But even this cursory interest would have ceased to be felt in a settlement, and among people accustomed, as South-western people are, to startling occurrences.

In a short time the murder would have been forgotten, or only slightly remembered, but for one circumstance connected with it, which still remained a mystery. This was the non-discovery of the corpse.

No one had the slightest doubt about Clancy being dead. What had become of his body?

Days had been spent in searching for it. The forest had been scoured—every thicket and cane-brake penetrated and minutely explored. The waters, both running and stagnant, were dragged and sounded all round the place where the death traces had been found; but without finding the dead!

It was this circumstance, so inexplicable, that kept curiosity alive, and prevented the affair from being forgotten. After weeks had gone by, it was still a theme of interest throughout the plantation—intense and fresh as ever—a topic of daily converse and conjecture.

Some were fain to believe that Charles Clancy might still be alive. Many would have gladly

adopted this theory; but the weight of evidence was against it.

For, if still living, he would have returned to his home—even though wounded, badly injured. The same strength, that must have taken him from the spot where he had fallen, would have brought him to the side of his sorrowing mother. And there was no reason why he should not return to her. On the contrary, all said that this would have been his first thought. They knew him to be an affectionate son—dutiful to devotion.

It needed not for his neighbors to reflect, that a living man would not be likely to leave hat and gun behind him. This was a trivial circumstance compared with his well-known filial affection, certain to have sent him home, if able to crawl thither.

No; he could not be alive.

Friends might wish it; some still having a faint hope, but no one a firm faith, that it was so.

While speculations about the romantic episode were still rife in the settlement, other incidents occurred, claiming a share of attention. A new owner had purchased, and entered into possession of, the plantation lately belonging to Archibald Armstrong—the mortgagee, Ephraim Darke, having so disposed of it. While the humbler holding of the Clancys had also passed into other hands.

It, too, had been held under a lien that covered land, house—even the chattels. And, after the widow's death, and the disappearance of her son, the bill-of-sale man stepped in—no one to make opposition—and took possession of everything. The scanty stock and few farm utensils, as also the furniture, were disposed of by public auction. The penates of the decayed Irish gentleman were knocked down to the highest bidder, and scattered throughout the neighborhood. Rare books, pictures, and other articles that bespoke fine culture, with some few remnants of *bijouterie* and *vertu*, became distributed in log cabins, where they were only appreciated according to the prices paid for them.

In fine, the little frame cottage was cleared of its plenishing, and for the time left empty, as tenantless. Even the dog, that had done such service in disclosing the criminality of him who had contributed to his ruin, was removed from the desolate home—Simeon Woodley having adopted the faithful animal and taken it to his own house.

So stood things in the neighborhood where Colonel Archibald Armstrong had once been chief planter—his daughters cheering it with their presence, and giving it grace by their beauty.

All was changed now. The settlement seemed like some ruined temple from which the supporting columns had been abstracted—"Elginised," if I may be allowed Byron's sarcastic expression—wrapped in a mantle of sadness, soon to fall into decay.

The neighbors were impressed with a thought of this kind, when Colonel Armstrong first spoke of leaving them. Still more after he had left, and the fair faces of his daughters were no more seen at their doors.

The gloom became complete when they reflected that they would never more behold the handsome countenance of Charles Clancy; never more listen to his frank, cheerful speech.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A GHOST GOING ITS ROUNDS.

It is about a month after Charles Clancy's disappearance, the hour of midnight—still and voiceless in northern climes, but not so in the lower region of the Mississippi Valley. There a semi-tropical heat that keeps Nature alive, even in the days of December.

It is not December, but a date close bearing on spring. February is written upon the heading of letters, and this is a spring month in Mississippi. The buds have already burst, and leaves are expanding upon the trees; some of the earlier ones flinging out fragrant blossoms. Birds, too, awaking from a short winter's silence, pour forth their amorous songs, filling glade and grove with music, that does not end with the day. The mimic thrush—the grand polyglot of the feathered community—carries the strain on through the hours of night; so well counterfeiting the notes of his fellow-songsters asleep, that you might fancy them all awake, still singing.

The nocturnal sounds of the southern forest are not all of this delightful kind. Mingling with them are notes neither sweet nor harmonious. The "gluck" of the great swamp frog, the "skirr" of tree-cricket, the screeching of owls, the lugubrious cry of the quail-bird, and, at intervals, the hoarse snorting of an alligator, are none of them agreeable. Still, the ear accustomed does not feel jarred by them. They are but the base notes, like those of the violoncello and trombone, needed to make complete the symphony of Nature's concert.

In the midst of this musical melange—midnight, as we have said, the hour, the place on the Lower Mississippi, and the particular locality the settlement referred to in this tale—a man, or a figure bearing the semblance of one, might

have been seen gliding along the edge of the swamp, already made mention of.

After skirting the mud-flat for a time, the figure—ghost or human, whichever it was—turned face toward the tract of lighter woodland, that extended between the dark cypress forest and the cleared ground of the plantations.

Crossing this, the nocturnal wayfarer soon came within sight of the deserted cottage, lately occupied by the Clancys.

The moonlight, falling upon his face, showed that it was white. Also, that it was pallid, with hollow eyes and cheeks sunken, as from sickness; some malady long endured, and not yet cured. As he strode across fallen logs, or climbed fences occasionally coming in the way, his tottering step told of a frame enfeebled.

When at length clear of the woods, and within sight of the unoccupied dwelling, he stopped, and remained contemplating it. That he knew of its being untenanted was evident, from the glance with which he was regarding it.

His familiarity with the place was equally evident. On entering the grounds through thick shrubbery at the back, he took the path leading up to the house, without appearing to have any doubt about its being the right one.

For all this he made approach with caution, looking suspiciously around—either actually afraid, or not desiring to be observed.

There was not much likelihood of his being so. It was midnight. At that hour all the settlement would, or should, be asleep. The house stood remote from its nearest neighbor, more than a mile. It was empty; had been stripped of its furniture, of everything. What would anyone want there?

What was he doing there? This question would have suggested itself to anyone who could have seen him; the more so after making note of his movements.

There was no one to do this; and he continued on to the house, to carry out whatever purpose had brought him thither.

He entered by the back door, where there was a little porch, as also a covered way, leading to a log cabin at the back—the kitchen.

Once within the porch, he tried the handle of the house door; which at a touch went open. There was no lock, or if there was, it had not been thought worth while to turn the key in it. There are no burglars in the backwoods. If there were, nothing in that house could have tempted them. It had been so cleared out at the auction sale, that a "rag, bone, and bottle merchant," would have found no effects.

The nocturnal visitor entered the empty house. The ring of his footsteps, though he still trod cautiously, gave out a sad, solemn sound. It was in unison with the sighs that came deep-drawn from his breast; at times so sonorous as to seem choking him.

He went from room to room. There were not many—only three of them. In each he remained a few moments, gazing dismally round. But in one—that which had been the widow's sleeping chamber—he tarried a little longer; regarding a particular spot—the place formerly occupied by the bed. Then was a sigh, louder than any that had preceded it. It came, as if from the bottom of his breast, and with it the words, low muttered:

"There she must have breathed her last!"

After this speech, more sighing, accompanied by the surer signs of sorrow—sobs and weeping. As the moonbeams, pouring in through the open window, fell upon his face, their pale silvery light sparkled upon tears, starting thick and fast from his hollow eyes, and coursing down his emaciated cheeks.

After surrendering himself some minutes to what appeared a very agony of grief, he turned out of the sleeping chamber; passed through the narrow hall-way; and on out into the porch. Not now the back one, but that facing to the front—to the highway.

On the other side of the road was an open tract of ground, half cleared, half woodland; the former sterile, the latter scraggy. It seemed to belong to no one, as if not worth claiming or cultivating. It had been, in fact, an appanage of Colonel Armstrong's estate, who had granted it to the public as the site for a schoolhouse, and a common burying-ground—free to all the settlement. The schoolhouse had disappeared, but the cemetery was still there—only distinguishable from the surrounding surface by some oblong elevations having the well-known configuration of graves. There were in all about a score of them; some few having a plain headboard—a piece of painted plank, with lettering rudely limned, recording the name and age of the interred.

Time and the weather had turned most of them grayish, with dates decayed, and the names scarcely legible. But there was one upon which the painting showed fresh and white; in the clear moonlight gleaming like a meteor.

He, who had explored the deserted dwelling, stood for a moment with his eyes directed on this more recently erected memorial. Then, stepping down from the porch, he passed through the wicket-gate; crossed the road; and went straight toward it, as though a hand had beckoned him thither.

When close up, he saw that it was over a grave upon which the herbage had not yet grown.

The night was a cold one—chill for that southern clime. The dew upon the withered grass of the grave turf was almost congealed into hoar frost, adding to its gloomy aspect.

The lettering upon the head-board was in shadow, the moon being upon the opposite side. But stooping forward, so as to bring his eyes close to the slab, he was enabled to decipher the inscription.

It was the simplest form of memento—only a name, with a date painted underneath. The name was—

"CAROLINE CLANCY."

After reading it, a fresh sob burst from his bosom, new tears started to his eyes, and he flung himself prostrate upon the grave. Disregarding the dew, thinking naught of the night's chillness, he threw his arms over the cold sod, embracing it as though it were the warm body of one dearly beloved!

For several minutes he remained thus. Then, suddenly rising erect, as if impelled by some strong purpose, there came from his lips, poured forth in wild, passionate accents, the speech:—

"Mother! Mother! I am still living! I am here! And you, Oh God, dead! You can no more know—no more hear me!"

They were the words of one frantic with grief, scarce knowing what he said.

Then sober reason seemed to assert itself, and he spoke again; but with voice, expression of features, attitude, everything so changed, that no one, seeing him the moment before, would have believed it the same man!

Upon his countenance sternness had replaced sorrow; the soft lines had become rigid; the sad melancholy late seen in his eyes had flared up, and was burning in a steady flame. Now, it was a glance that told of determination to take revenge for some wrong deeply felt. And a vengeance, too, already resolved upon.

Once more he looked down upon the grave; then up to the sky, till the moon, coursing across high heaven, fell dull upon his face. With his body slightly leaning backward, the arms down by his sides, stiffly extended, the hands closed in convulsive clutch, he cried out:—

"By the heavens above—by the shade of my murdered mother, who lies beneath—I swear not to know rest, never more seek contentment, till I have found her murderer! Night and day,--through summer and winter—shall I search for him. Yes; search till I've found and punished this man, this monster, who has brought blight on me, death to my mother, and desolation to our house! Ah! think not you can escape me! Texas, whither I know you have gone, will not be large enough to hold—nor its wilderness wide enough to screen you from my vengeance. If not found there, I shall follow you to the end of the earth—to the end of the earth, Richard Darke!"

"Charles Clancy!"

He turned as if a shot had struck him. The voice came from a man, standing within six feet of him!

The man was Simeon Woodley.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

STALKING AMONG GRAVES.

THROUGHOUT the settlement there had been no one so zealous in the search after the body of Charles Clancy, or determined upon tracking up his assassin, as Simeon Woodley. Between him and Clancy had existed a strong feeling of friendship; such as might be expected to spring from a similarity of tastes and community of calling.

It is true the younger hunter was only an amateur in the profession, indulging in it for the pleasure it afforded; while Woodley followed it as the means of gaining a livelihood.

Notwithstanding this dissimilarity of purpose, the two had often met in the woods, and joined in the pursuit of game—assisting one another in the chase, and sharing its spoils. Otherwise, Clancy, though poor, was educated, and, in point of social status, acknowledged to be a gentleman; while Woodley was but a rough backwoodsman, and made no pretensions beyond. He lived in a log cabin; wore the coarse homespun, and homewove cloth of the country; and maintained himself by the produce of his traps, snares, and gun. He dealt in deer and bear meat, as well as their skins; which, along with, now and then, a batch of wild turkeys, he found ready sale for in the markets of Natchez.

Thus, meeting and hunting together, the two had become, if not intimate associates, at least occasional comrades, with a good-will and fellow-feeling for one another. This was strengthened by the fact, that in every partition of a hunting-day's spoils, Clancy was accustomed to content himself with the lesser share, leaving the larger one to his more needy comrade, to score up his marketing account. These acts of generosity—done in such a way as not to make the professional hunter feel ashamed of the ob-

ligation—had won from him a friendship bordering on affection—in short, devotion.

Moreover, Woodley himself, though of rough, almost uncouth, exterior, was of a true and loyal disposition. He was, therefore, capable of appreciating, as well as admiring, the same noble qualities in his younger associate.

Yet another lien existed between the two. They had met in Texas; Woodley having been a resident of the "Lone Star State" at the time Clancy paid his visit to it. The old hunter had but lately returned to Mississippi—the settlement near Natchez being his original place of abode, and the river bottom adjacent his former hunting-ground. He and Clancy had not only come together in Texas, but there hunted together. Still more, Woodley was one of the men who had stood by Clancy at Nacogdoches, in the scrape about the stolen horse, spoken of by Borlase in the Choctaw Chief. What the horse-thief had confessed in his cups was most, if not all, of it true. His detention, and whipping at the post, had taken place as he described it; and Simeon Woodley was one of that same party, which passed sentence upon him, and saw it carried into execution.

From all this it will be seen, that something more than an ordinary bond of companionship existed between Woodley and Clancy. Hence the zeal displayed by the former in searching for the dead body of his friend, as also to discover the assassin and bring him to justice.

From that day it had never flagged. Although the criminal had been made known, captured, and afterward escaped punishment for his crime, Simeon Woodley had not given up the hope of some day recapturing him. Nor had he ceased his search for the remains of the missing man. He knew they must be somewhere—if not the body itself, its bones. The wolves and vultures would not eat these. Only one creature was likely to have devoured, and destroyed them so as to leave no traces. This was the great saurian of the cypress swamps.

But the hunter did not believe that an alligator had anything to do with the disappearance of the body. It had been carried off soon after the moment of the murder. The sign showed this to him who could carefully interpret it. Showed, also, that no crocodile could have been the ravisher. The reptile would have left a trail, with the marks of its handlike paws easily discernible.

Still, to the old hunter himself the missing body, as also the absence of traces to tell why it was so, were things that mystified him.

There were times when he had doubts about Clancy being dead. If dead, he could not, for the life of him, conceive what had become of the body. A corpse could not carry itself away; and who was there to have carried it? If Darke had himself removed it, then why his surprise on finding it gone, and only the hat and gun remaining? More than mere surprise; he had shown as if stricken with awe. This Simeon Woodley, closely observing him, had noticed and made a note of. From it he now reasoned, and correctly, too: that it was not Darke who had taken the body away.

But who else could, or would? And whither had it been conveyed? Where was it?

The reason for the dog having been tied to the palmetto he understood, or thought he did. Darke had done it to prevent the animal from returning home. Though this theory was not altogether satisfactory. Why had he not also killed the dog?

In all his tracking experience—whether of deer, bear, buffalo, panther, or wild-cat—never was Simeon Woodley so baffled, puzzled, perplexed. He seemed, in short, completely thrown off the trail. And, as every day the scent became colder and the "sign" less discernible, he began to despair of being able either to solve the mystery of the missing body, or bring the criminal to justice.

Still did the determination to do both remain strong as ever in his breast. For there, fresh as ever, lived the friendly feeling, and dear as ever dwelt the memory of Charles Clancy. Every time the old hunter started out on the chase would his thought revert to his younger associate—now more than ever missed.

In truth, Clancy's sad fate, connecting itself with the scenes that now knew him no more—these recalling old souvenirs—produced such an impression on the mind of the backwoodsman, that he could not much longer bear it, and was contemplating a return to Texas.

On its far frontier he might find distraction for his thoughts, by stalking deer, decoying antelopes, "roping" mustangs, doing battle with bears; to say nothing of "throwing" buffalo. Moreover, who could tell that he might not there come across the man—the murderer?

Of this very thing was Simeon Woodley thinking, as, bestriding his horse, he made his way back from Natchez, whither he had been to dispose of some pelts and deer-meat—a week's produce of his gun. The road to his own humble domicile led him past the deserted dwelling of the Clancys. On coming within sight of the untenanted cottage he merely glanced at it; though not without a throb of painful reminiscence, as he recalled the sad fate of those who had once occupied it.

The pang was short-lived. He had too often felt it before to dwell upon it now.

Making an effort to forget the gloomy record, he was riding on, when a figure flitting across the road, some fifty yards in advance, arrested his attention, causing him to come to a stop.

The clear moonlight showed the figure to be that of a man, and also one whose movements betrayed absence of mind, if not actual aberration. At all events, Simeon Woodley thought so.

From the same movements he could tell the man had not yet seen him; as he was riding under trees that shadowed the whole surface of the road. And the deep dust so deadened the stroke of his horse's hoofs, that this could not have been heard twenty feet from the spot upon which the animal was treading.

With the habit of a hunter at first sight of game, Woodley at once tightened rein; determined upon watching the midnight wanderer, whose eccentric gait had given him some surprise.

Still keeping in the saddle, he saw the latter go on to the little woodland cemetery, and stop by the side of a grave. He saw him bend forward, as if to read the epitaph on its painted slab, and soon after fall prostrate upon the earth, apparently in prayer.

Woodley well knew the grave thus venerated. He knew that under that sod reposed the remains of Caroline Clancy; for he had himself assisted in carrying them thither, and afterward smoothing the turf that covered them. He had also been instrumental in erecting that frail tablet to her memory.

No wonder at his being able to distinguish her grave!

Who, then, was this man, at midnight—in the chill, silent hour of midnight—flinging himself down upon it, in sorrow, or adoration? Who could he be?

For a moment the backwoodsman surrendered himself to an emotion stronger than curiosity! It did not overcome his presence of mind, or hinder him from observing the caution. habitual to him as a hunter.

Instead of putting to the spur, and riding straight up to the spot, he slipped softly out of the saddle, hastily tied his horse to a tree, then advanced stealthily, and with as much prevision as if stalking a shy stag.

Without being observed, or his presence in any way made known to him recumbent upon the grave, he succeeded in reaching the borderline of the little backwoods burying-ground. There was no wall or fence around it—no inclosure of any kind—only some bushes, the straggling selvedge of the adjacent woodland.

Screened by these, the hunter crawled on over the graves, until within less than six paces of the man whose movements mystified him, and who was still lying along the one latest made, with arms stretched over, apparently embracing it!

Woodley kept his crouching attitude until the man arose to his feet, and, standing erect, gave utterance to the oath already recorded.

Hearing the strange, wild words, and seeing, under the full moonbeam, a form well known to him—but which he never expected to have looked upon again—the old hunter was spell-bound with surprise.

It was some moments before he could recover himself, and shake off the fancy of its being all a dream.

But the man's face was now turned toward him, the moonlight fell fair upon it, and he could not be mistaken. Despite the pallid skin and features showing emaciation—despite the hollow cheek and glaring eye—he recognized the face of his friend.

No longer doubting the identity, sure it was no dream, he sprung forward with outstretched arms, uttering the cry:

"Charles Clancy!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A STARTLED CANOE-MAN.

It was no ghost, then, Simeon Woodley had come in contact with. The figure gliding toward the grave of Caroline Clancy—falling prostrate upon it, and afterward standing erect over it, with face turned heavenward and hands clenched, in an attitude of adjuration—was not of another world. No spirit had given utterance to that stern vow of vengeance, but a mortal man—he, whose name had leaped from the hunter's lips on the instant of his being identified.

For Charles Clancy it assuredly was—face, figure, voice, everything—Charles Clancy in the flesh, as in the spirit—still living, speaking, acting.

Had he been dead, and was now come to life again? Or only half-dead, and had recovered? Which?

And where had he been during the days of his disappearance? In what secret spot could he have hidden, to baffle the keenest search for him? And why had he hidden himself? Why kept away?

These and other like interrogatories had rushed into the mind of the old hunter as he looked upon Clancy living. They also parted in quick succession from his lips.

The reader will be asking the same questions, and expecting an answer to them.

It shall be given.

To one man there was nothing mysterious about the disappearance of the body—and only one. This was not Richard Darke, but an individual who had as much reason to dislike the latter, and also fear him, as Charles Clancy himself.

In order to make things clear, it will be necessary to narrate an incident, that occurred soon after Clancy was shot down, in which this personage bore a conspicuous part.

The *mise-en-scene* need not be described, as this has been done already, and only needs recalling. It was the same place under the cypress, where Darke delivered what he supposed to be, and triumphantly pronounced, the death shot of his hated rival.

After his hurried retreat from the spot, all was silent there, as if he had succeeded in his deadly design.

The forest for some distance around was even stiller than before. The repeated cracking of the guns, and the noise of the scuffle, had awed its ordinary denizens—bird, insect, reptile, and quadruped, and all of them had suspended their nocturnal concert.

The period of tranquillity was extended, on their again hearing a sound they had already listened to, and which they knew did not naturally belong to their wild-wood orchestra. On the contrary, to most of them it proclaimed a hostile note. This was the yelping of a dog, or rather the howling of a hound. They had heard the same but a short while before, interrupted between the shots; after the last, for some moments again silent. Now had it recommenced, and was continued in a prolonged note, with tones more lugubrious than ever.

Scarce necessary to say, it was Charles Clancy's deer-hound that was making this unnatural noise in the forest.

The dog, after being shot at by Darke, and hit, had not gone home. For it there was no home without a master; and it knew its master was not there. In the breast of the dumb brute, affection had again got the better of its fears; and, once more turning, it had trotted back to the spot where the last scene of the tragedy had been enacted.

This time it was not hindered from approaching the place. The assassin, having wound up his cruel work, had hurriedly made off, and was still continuing his retreat.

The dog drew up, at first cautiously and with crawling gait; then, more confidently, when it saw that the coast was clear.

On getting under the tree, where the deadly encounter had terminated, it raised its head and looked around, evidently astonished. It expected to find its master where it had last seen him lying. There was no master there; only a shock of moss strewn over the ground, thickly piled on a particular spot.

Giving a yelp, and lowering its snout, the dog trotted around the tree; entering and exploring the angular spaces between the buttresses.

This brought it back to the place of beginning; where it stopped, sniffed the air, and caught the scent of fresh blood steaming up from out the moss-heap.

With a bound it threw itself upon the heap, and commenced scattering it aside. Tossing off the sticks with its snout, and scratching aside the loose parasite with its paws, it laid bare a portion of the body, until Charles Clancy's head, breast, arms, and shoulders were uncovered to the view.

Then, cowering down alongside it, and giving utterance to a low whimper, it commenced licking the face, still warm.

After a time it desisted from this, its low whine changing to a loud, plaintive howling, that might have been heard a half-mile off through the forest.

It was heard by Richard Darke, as he retreated; causing him to further quicken his footsteps. It was heard, too, by the coon hunter, seated in the tree-fork; making him cling more tenaciously to his perch. And it was heard by a third individual; who, if not as much as the former, had more reason than the latter to feel frightened at the sound.

This was a man paddling a canoe along the adjacent creek, which, passing at some two hundred yards' distance, discharged its slow-flowing current into the more stagnant waters of the swamp.

Coming from the latter, the canoe-man had just entered the channel of the stream when his ear caught the sounds, still distant, carried in tempered reverberation through the thick-standing tree-trunks.

On hearing them he suspended the stroke of the paddle, with a suddenness that told of his being more than a little alarmed. He was not himself making any noise, that could hinder him from catching the most indistinct whisper of the woods. He had been cleaving his way through the water at a slow pace, and silently; as if his voyage was one of stealth, and required cautious movement.

The craft he navigated was of the rudest possible construction—in short, what is known in the Mississippi valley as a "dug-out."

The face and figure of its occupant merit a different description. Though the double shadow of the foliage and twilight scarce permitted either to be seen, still there was light enough to trace in his figure the outlines of a Hercules; while the face, perfectly beardless, showed features of bold and not ill-favored expression. The color of his skin, closely approximating to that of newly-tanned leather, told him to be a mulatto.

A coarse cotton shirt of "copperas stripe," and loose drawers of like material, belted above the hips, were all of body wear he appeared to have; while a battered wool hat of Penitentiary fabric was the sole furnishing of his head. This last did not proclaim him a fugitive from justice; for it was then the wear of almost every man of color in Mississippi. The cautious stroke of his paddle, with the rapidity with which he had suspended it on hearing the sound, was better proof of his being a fugitive from something—perhaps *injustice*. One well acquainted with the country and its customs—with the topography of the place—taking into account its remoteness from any habitation; its inaccessibility, silence, and solitude—connecting these with the cautious movements of the canoe-man, would at once have pronounced him a runaway slave.

And this in reality he was.

No wonder he had plucked his paddle from the water, on hearing the bay of a hound. To him there could have been no sound more significant—more awe-inspiring than that.

With the blade held aloft he placed himself in an attitude to listen, allowing the dug-out to drift. There was not much current; for the creek was a kind of "bayou," or branch of a lagoon. Besides, going downward would be carrying him away from the proximity of the suspected peril. The plantation settlements lay above; and from this direction came the sounds that had stayed him in his course.

He was on his way from his covert in the cypress swamp, to a trysting-place on its edge; where he might expect to find a confederate from one of the plantations; or, if not that, a supply of secreted provisions.

In the sounds heard he recognized a signal of danger—the danger of losing his liberty. More; it might cause him to have his back scored with the cowhide, and undergo still other and greater torture.

Tilting the "Penitentiary" to one side, and bending his ear low down, he continued to listen. Had there been light to show his countenance, there would have been seen in it no sign either of cowardice or stupidity—notwithstanding its tawny hue. It is not the timid, or stolid, who take this way to escape from the chain of slavery, but the bold, intelligent and cunning.

The canoe-man was of this stamp; and, after listening for a short while to the sound that had startled him, he once more plied his paddle, and impelled the craft up the creek.

Now on the alert, he continued on with increased caution, and, if possible, more noiselessly than ever. So light was the dip of his short broad-bladed oar, that it did not hinder him from noting every noise—even the slightest that stirred among the cypresses.

Above all, his ear was bent to catch the cries of the hound, still kept up in plaintive tone. And, as his strokes were slow-measured, he had time to reflect upon, and endeavor to make out, why the animal was so lugubriously discoursing.

"Thar's no danger in the growl o' that dog," he said to himself. "I know it a'most as well as my own voice. It's the hound belongin' to young Clancy. He ain't no slave-catcher."

"Lor!" he exclaimed, again suspending his stroke, and bending his ear to the canoe's edge, "What can be the matter with the brute? Thar's somethin' amiss when Clancy's dog goes on that way. Hope 'tain't no mischance happened to his young master. Come what come will, I'll steal nigher the place an' see."

Propelling the dug-out to increased speed, he was soon opposite the spot where the animal was still giving tongue.

Shooting the canoe in shore, he leaped lightly on the bank; and then moored the craft by tying it to the root of a tree that projected out over the water.

Cautiously striking off among the cypresses, still guided by the yelps of the dog, he came within sight of the spot where the animal should be seen.

He approached it with extreme reserve, crouching among the cypress "knees," and flitting like a shadow from trunk to trunk.

On getting near, and seeing no sign of human being—only the hound standing half hidden among the moss—he became more confident, and walked forward in an upright attitude.

The dog knew, and trotted out to meet him; for awhile suspending its pitiful note.

Then, with a low whimper, the creature ran back and crouched down beside the half-concealed body.

The canoe-man saw it now; saw that it was a corpse!

mulatto, as soon as he set eyes on the face. "Dead—killed—more than that, murdered; for sure, it's been this. Gorramity! what can it mean?"

For a moment he stood aghast, with arms up-raised, and eyes staring.

Then something seemed to change his thoughts, and he mutteringly said:

"Is he sure gone dead? Maybe not yet."

To convince himself, he knelt down beside the body, having first cleared away the loose coverlet still partially shrouding it.

He saw the blood, and the wound from which it was welling. He laid his hand over the heart, to ascertain whether it might not still be beating.

Surely it was; or was he mistaken?

The pulse would be a better test; and he proceeded to feel it, taking the smooth white wrist between his rough brown-skinned fingers.

"It beats! I do b'lieve it beats!" were his hopeful words.

For a while longer he retained his grasp of the wrist. To make more sure, he tried the artery at different points, with a touch as tender as if he was holding in his hand the life of an infant.

He became almost certain that the pulse still beat; that there was yet breath in the body.

What next? What was he to do?

Hasten to the settlement, and bring a doctor to the place?

He dared not do this, nor fetch assistance of any kind. He did not think of such a thing. If not his life, his liberty was at stake. To show himself to a white man would be to go back into hated bondage—to the slavery from which he had, with the utmost difficulty, escaped. It would be an act of grand generosity—a self-sacrifice—more than man, more than human being was capable of. Could a poor runaway slave be expected to make it?

Some sacrifice he intended making, as might be gathered from his muttered words:

"Breath in his body or no breath, it won't do to leave it lyin' here. Poor young gen'leman! What would Miss Helen say if she see'd him now? What will she say when she hear o' it? I wonder who's done it? No, I don't wonder—not a bit. There's only one man likely to 'a' left such ugly work. From what Jule's told me, I thought it would come to this some day. Wish I could 'a' been about to warn him. Well, it's too late now. The devil has got the upper hand, as seems always the way. Ah! what 'll become o' Miss Armstrong? She loved him sure as I love Jule, or Jule love me. All goin' away; all goin' to Texas. Then what's to come o' myself, if I don't find some way to get there too? I shall do that, or die tryin'."

For some moments the mulatto—who was no other than Darke's fugitive slave, Jupiter—stood over the prostrate form of Charles Clancy, giving way to his despondent thoughts, as expressed in these disjointed speeches.

Then, once more looking down upon the body, seeing the blood still oozing from the wound, and remembering that the man might not yet be dead, his resolve to act—to do something—came back to him; and he only remained inactive from not knowing what was best to be done.

"Poor young gen'leman!" he again said, in a compassionating tone; "dead or alive, it wouldn't be right to leave him lyin' there. The wolves an' carrion crows to help 'em—they'd soon make bare bones of his body, so nicely shaped—ah! spoil his handsome face, too. They mustn't. He's did me a kindness more 'n once. It's my turn now; an', slave, mulatto, colored man as they call me, I'll show them that under a yellow skin there can be gratitude, same as under a white one—maybe more. Show them! Who? Ha! ha! ha! That's good. Lucky for me there's nobody to see, or know of it. If there was—Well; no matter. What ought I to do 'bout this?"

For a while he stood silently considering. Then, seemingly having resolved upon a course of action, he opened his arms, and stooped down—as if intending to take up the body, and carry it clear away from the spot.

This was what he intended. But just at that moment the hound—hitherto pacified by his presence, and for a time quiet—again gave out its mournful monotone, continuing the dirge over its dead master.

"Gorramity!" exclaimed the fugitive, feeling fresh alarm as he listened. "What's to be done with the dog? If I take him along he'd be sure, some time or other, to make noise, and guide the nigger-catchers to my hidin'-place. Sure to do it. If I leave him here it'll be worse still. He can't follow me all the way through the water; but he'd show them where the dug-out lay; an' then they'd know enough to—I have it!"

The last speech pointed to some plan. It was followed by others addressed to the dog, and couched in coaxing tone. "Here! come up, ole fella! Don't be afeard! It's Jupe, your master's friend. You know Jupe? Ah! that's a good dog; I thought you wouldn't be 'fraid o' me. Now, stand still; let me slip this round your neck. I'm not goin' to hang you—only to keep you quiet a bit. Steady!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

IS IT A CORPSE?

"MASSER CHARLES CLANCY!" exclaimed the

While talking in this strain, he pulled a piece of cord out of his pocket, and, soon after saying "steady," had it knotted around the neck of the animal. To this the latter made no resistance; yielding to the manipulation as if knowing it was done by a friendly hand, and for its good.

Close by was a thicket of palmettoes, these forming the only underwood of the cypress forest. Their broad fan-shaped leaves, growing with short stalks directly out of the ground, and rising to some three feet in height, covered the surface as with a mantle of Lincoln green.

Into their midst he conducted the dog, the animal following freely, without making stop or show of unwillingness.

When well in among the palmettoes, the mulatto stooped down, tied the cord to one of their shanks—securing it with a safe knot.

He remained not a moment after; not even to say a parting word to the betrayed quadruped, nor take note of the convulsive struggles it was making to set itself free. He did not so much

the body of the grown man had been that of a new-born babe.

Having brought his burden to a balance, he carried it toward the creek, and laid it gently down, along the bottom of his dug-out.

Then, entering after, he undid the slip-knot that had kept the canoe from drifting; pushed the craft clear of its mooring, and propelled it back down the stream, as silently as he had ascended.

He had taken care to leave no trace behind him—no footprint or mark of any kind—not a scratch. The dug-out had been brought to among the straggling roots of a sycamore that projected well out into the water. Upon these, serving as a wharf, he had debarked; and from them he made embarkation—bearing his burden lightly over them. And between the place of anchorage and the blood-stained spot, the ground, thickly bedded with the fallen foliage of the cypresses, would scarce have disclosed the tracks of a shod horse to the eyes of the most skillful tracker.

nothingness, had left a hollow space—a huge, cavernous void, such as may often be observed in a forest of the deciduous cypress, and not unfrequently of such dimensions as to be capable of giving shelter to the traveler with his horse. I have myself spent a night in such lodging—sleeping soundly at full stretch, my steed lying alongside of me.

No horse could have reached the hollow tree in which Darke's runaway had taken refuge, from what he far more feared than either rain or storm. Man himself could not approach it, except by skiff or canoe—something to make way through water that could not be waded. Even these could not at all times be taken up to the little islet on which the hollow cypress stood. Around it for two hundred yards extended a quagmire of mud, so soft and deep as to make passage by a pedestrian difficult—in places impossible. This, in season of inundation, was covered with water, and a canoe might cross it. At other times it was impassable, except by snake, turtle, or alligator.



ALONG THE LOGS.—Page 28.

as hearken to the yelps that accompanied them, as a protest against such unexpected and ill-deserved captivity.

The canoe-man had other things to do—other thoughts to occupy him. Fears were in his mind, dangers before him, alongside which the act of leaving a dog tied to a palmetto stalk, perhaps to perish, was not worth a moment's consideration.

Nor did he stay a moment to consider it. As soon as he had secured the creature—and thus completing his precautions against its following him—he returned hastily to the tree under which Clancy lay.

Once more bending down beside him, he took hold of his pulse, at the same time placing his ear over the heart. He was under the impression that both still beat, though not sure!

For all this he extended his arms around the body, lifted it from the ground—raising it up to the height of his breast. His herculean strength enabled him to do this, as easily as if

He felt sure it would show no trace of his to any one coming after him.

And he was right; for it did not.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE HOME OF THE HUNTED SLAVE.

DEEP in the heart of the cypress swamp, in a spot only approachable by water craft, was the home and hiding-place of Ephraim Darke's absconded slave.

In a lair, not much better than that of a hunted beast, he had found an asylum—beyond the keen scent of savage dogs, and the astute trailing of their inhuman master. There Nature had provided him with a shelter from the storm; a house, if rude, ready built for him, and strong as if constructed by human hands.

It was inside a tree, still standing and in vigorous growth; a gigantic cypress, buttressed all round the base, and very similar to that under which Clancy had been shot. The heart-wood having first decayed, and then crumbled to

Still there was a way of traversing this unsteady track, for one who knew it—for Jupiter, Nature had here, again, lent her aid to the oppressed fleeing from oppression. In her wrath, pressed by tempest and tornado, she had laid prostrate several trees; whose trunks, lying upon the mud and lapping on one another, formed a continuous causeway across the slimy substratum. Where there chanced to be a break, a little human ingenuity—made to look as much as possible like Nature's own work—supplied the connecting link.

It was along this singular causeway the mulatto had carried the insensible form of Charles Clancy; it being at that season of the year when the waters were low, and the mud-bank barred the passage of his dug-out beyond the place where he had secreted it.

The very difficulty of reaching it by such a path, rendered doubly safe the slave's asylum. In approaching it, his feet made no tell-tale print and left no trace available for the purpose.

of the cruel pursuer. More than a month had elapsed since his disappearance from Ephraim Darke's plantation; and although suspected of harboring in the swamp—suspected by the sharpest negro-catcher in the settlement, Ephraim Darke's own son—and by him, too, zealously sought for—the mulatto had managed to baffle all search.

Meanwhile he had neither much starved, nor much suffered—except from solitude. In his domicile, though rude, he had contrived to surround himself with something of comfort. The Spanish moss, hanging from the branches above, could be collected in cartloads. Armfuls were sufficient to furnish a soft couch, on which he could repose himself. For food he was never hard up—never a whole day deficient. If it came to that, he could easily entrap a young alligator, and make a meal off the tenderest part of its tail; which yields a steak, if not equal to beef, at all events, eatable.

But Jupe was not often driven to this diet, too much of a musky flavor. His usual fare was roast pork; now and then broiled chicken; at times a fricassee of 'coon, or a barbecue of 'possum. Along with these he had bread—corn-bread—in the various shapes of "pone," "hoe-cake," and "dodger." And sometimes, too, though more rarely, "Virginia biscuit," of the sweetest and whitest flour, might be seen stored upon the shelves he had scooped out against the walls of his tree-cave. Only on very rare occasions had his larder been empty.

Whence came the pork, the broiled chicken, and bread? The 'coon and 'possum might be accounted for; these being wild-wood game, which it was possible for him to procure himself. But the other viands were domestic produce, and must be got from the plantations.

And they were got from a plantation—that of Ephraim Darke! Had the fugitive slave stolen them? Not likely. Theft such as that would have been too full of risk, even under the stimulus of keen hunger; too dangerous, with Ephraim Darke's sharp son prowling around the premises. The provisions may have been stolen—some of them were—but not by Jupiter himself. Blue Bill had been the thief, as he was also the confederate of his fugitive fellow-slave.

Faithfully had he preserved the secret of his friend's hiding-place, even from his better half. Phoebe was only so far privy to it, that she knew Jupe was stowed away somewhere—in the swamp or the woods. She knew this by the repeated draughts on her own meat-safe, and the extra call upon her culinary skill. She had no jealous suspicion, that the provisions every now and then taken from her scanty store, and carried off by her husband as he went cooning, were for Brown Bet. She knew they were for Jupiter, and made no protest.

So effectively had the coon-hunter carried out the trust of friendship, that the runaway had never been in great strait during his sojourn in the swamp. Blue Bill's noted penchant for the chase gave him plausible excuse for prolonged absences from the quarter; while its products, the coon-skins, enabled him to supply Jupiter with some of the luxuries, as well as necessities of life. At times, under his coat-skirt, might have been discovered a gourd filled with corn-whisky, beside a plug of tobacco; both of which afterward appeared in a corner of the tree-cave.

It was not lack of food or drink, that had tempted the runaway from his lair on that evening when he found Clancy under the cypress. He had ventured forth to appease an appetite, in men of African race almost as strong as that of hunger or thirst. This was a hankering after news—a longing to hear them. Had he been a voluntary hermit, it might have been different. But he was nothing of the kind. In the large-bodied and well-proportioned mulatto, there was not the inkling of an inclination to imitate the life of Simon Stylites. His solitude was a thing altogether involuntary.

On that evening he had hopes of getting no ordinary news, but tidings to thrill the heart—even his, under a coarse cotton shirt and a yellow skin. He expected to learn something about his sweetheart. He had already heard she was soon to leave the neighborhood; taken *nolens volens* along with her master—going willingly with her young mistress. He knew all about their movements, plans, and purposes; when they were to go, and whither bound. He had a hope—as it was his design—of being able soon to follow them to their new home, and there once more rejoin his beloved Jule.

But he had a wish, also, to see her before their departure. And it was to arrange a meeting, through the intervention of Blue Bill, he was making that silent excursion up the creek.

The spot where he expected to find the coon-hunter, was the same where he had debarked from his dug-out, going on to where Clancy lay. For reasons already known, Blue Bill came not to the trysting-place; and the after incidents drove all idea of meeting the mulatto out of his mind.

The same was it with Jupiter; for the time forgetting Jule. His only thought was of befriending the young gentleman, who had more than once befriended him. If dead, to save his body from being mutilated by wild cats and wolves;

if living, to take steps for restoring it to health and strength.

With this intent had he taken it up, carried it to his dug-out, and then headed toward his home, in the darkest recesses of the swamp.

Gliding on for more than a mile, all the while in silence, most of the track tortuous, now across reaches of clear water, anon through narrow channels and around thickly standing trees, whose branches drooped down till their twigs brushed the Penitentiary hat upon his head—the fugitive slave pushed forward his canoe.

He did not succeed in thus taking it all the way to his place of abode. The pathway of prostrate trunks was the only means of reaching this, and he knew it. He knew also the spot at which to suspend the stroke of his paddle. It was the accustomed mooring-place of his canoe—among the tops of a fallen tree, whose leaves, still clinging to the branches, along with a festoonery of moss, would effectually screen the craft from observation.

After docking the dug-out, as he had often done, and making it fast with the tie-cord, he lifted the body in his arms, and stepped up on the rounded edge of the nearest tree-trunk.

Then, poising himself to preserve equilibrium, and more securely grasping the helpless form, he set his face toward the spot that had for weeks afforded him shelter and a sleeping-place.

Along the difficult path he continued to make way, carrying Charles Clancy, still unconscious; himself not sure whether he bore a living man or a dead body.

Whichever his burden might be, it needed all the mulatto's strength to sustain it. There were times when he had to stop and take breath; other times, that he had difficulty in preserving his balance on the convex and slippery surface of the logs.

Once he came near toppling over with his load. Had he done so, what would have been the result? Only a fall upon soft mud, and perhaps sinking into it! Far more than this; for there would have been danger—fatal disaster in such a slip. Through the dark ooze crawled hideous, horrid reptiles—among them the largest of lizards, the alligator. The monster's teeth could be seen gleaming white in the somber shadow, while the snapping of its jaws sounded terribly distinct amid the stillness of the submerged forest.

A band of brutes followed on each flank, as he made his way along the logs. No doubt, their instinct admonished them, that the thing carried in the man's arms was worth watching, and might ere long furnish them with a feast.

If so, their instinct was for once at fault, and their concupiscence foiled. They made no banquet on the body he was bearing; for he succeeded in getting it safe to his covert, and deposited it on his own soft couch of moss.

Then, once more stooping over it, with listening ears and touch of hand, he eagerly sought an answer to the question:

"Is Charles Clancy alive?"

To his joy, it was answered in the affirmative—by beat of pulse, by bounding of the heart, by breathing distinctly heard. Not only this, but the body began to move, as if released from some heavy load, that, hitherto pressing upon, had kept it from stirring.

Clancy's arms were slowly uplifted; his eyelids gradually opened; while from his lips came a sigh, long drawn; as if heaved from the very bottom of his breast.

This was followed by some words spoken in a whisper; but so indistinctly uttered, the mulatto could not make out their meaning. He could only distinguish two names, well known to him.

They were *Helen Armstrong* and *Richard Darke*.

He often heard them afterward; more clearly, if not more coherently, pronounced. Often during the days of delirious raving that succeeded, while, with sympathizing heart, he sat by the side of the wounded man, tenderly nursing him.

And he at length nursed him into convalescence. The shot, designed to have been Clancy's death shot, had failed of its effect. The bullet had but broken a rib, and glanced off, without entering the lungs. The shock had stunned him; and this, with the copious hemorrhage, from a cut artery, had caused fainting, afterward succeeded by fever and delirium.

With unwearied watchfulness his kind host tended, and saw him safe through all. And when, at length, Clancy grew strong enough to think and talk of plans for the future, as a reward for his services, the slave received from his lips a promise, to be aided by him in escaping from the swamp—as from the bondage that had forced him to flee to it.

Clancy spoke of Texas; of his determination to go thither, and take Jupiter along with him. At the same time, he cautioned the runaway to say naught of his intention to Blue Bill—knowing the latter to be his sole means of communication with the settlement. This caution was indeed unnecessary, since he had already warned Jupiter against making known the fact of his being still alive. And this had been so strictly attended to, that the coon-hunter himself fully believed Clancy to be dead; nor had he a sus-

picion, that he was all along finding food for him. He only wondered at Jupiter of late becoming such a gourmand and gourmet, from his not only having drawn more amply upon his store of provisions, but shown himself more exacting as to their quality.

Clancy had his own reasons for enjoining Jupiter to secrecy. He had received a full account of all that occurred in the settlement since that unhappy, and to him so near fatal, day. The false belief in his own death—that, too true, alas! of his mother—the arrest of Darke—his escape—the departure of the Armstrongs from the place—in short, everything that had since taken place was now known to him. Every circumstance in detail had been communicated to Jupiter by the coon-hunter—unsuspicious of the ear it was eventually to reach.

One only had been omitted. Strange to say, the very one that might have most comforted Charles Clancy in his distress, given joy to him in his solitude, and perhaps changed, or, at all events, modified his plans of future action. The coon-hunter had said nothing to Jupiter about the letter dropped by Darke. No more had he spoken of the picture.

It may have been forgetfulness. More likely the omission was for want of time, as well as thought. For after the day of the supposed assassination, a suspicion had entered the mind of Ephraim Darke, that Blue Bill could, if he liked, throw some light on the matter.

As a consequence, the coon-hunter was kept under surveillance; and in provisioning his fugitive fellow-slave he had to act with more than the ordinary caution. For this reason, his interviews with Jupiter had been rarer and shorter than before. Hence might it be, that the story of the intercepted letter remained untold.

Whether for this, or whatever other reason, it was unknown to Charles Clancy on the night, when, parting from the swamp edge—to which, in his dug-out, Jupiter had conveyed him—he revisited his own deserted home, stood over the grave of his mother, and proclaimed that vow of vengeance, overheard by the hunter.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A STRENGTHENING MEDICINE.

SIMEON WOODLEY saw a man, he had reason to believe dead, apparently risen from the tomb. Saw him in a place appropriate to resurrection—by the side of a recently-made grave—in the heart of a burying-ground!

"Charles Clancy," he first exclaimed. Then added, "Charley Clancy, is it you, or your ghost?"

The backwoodsman was not above believing in ghosts, and for a moment the awe of the supernatural was upon him.

It passed off, as soon as he saw it was real flesh and blood that stood before him—Charles Clancy himself—and not his wraith. He reached this conclusion the sooner, from his having entertained a latent belief that Clancy was alive. This he had held from the first; or since the search for the body had proved bootless.

After the interrogatory, Woodley opened wide his arms, and then closed them around his old hunting associate.

Joy at seeing the latter still in the land of the living, expelled every trace of superstitious thought, and he gave way to an exuberance of congratulation.

On Clancy's side the only return was a smile, with a few confused words, that seemed to speak more of sadness than satisfaction. The expression upon his face was rather of chagrin, as if sorry at the encounter having occurred. His words gave proof of it.

"Simeon Woodley," he said, "I should have been happy to meet you at any future time, but not now. I have reasons for regretting that we have come together."

"Why, Clancy?" returned the old hunter, supremely astonished at the coolness with which his warm advances had been received. "Charley Clancy! Surely you know I'm y'ur friend?"

"Right well I know it."

"Wal, then, believin' you to be dead—tho' I for one never felt sure o't—still thinkin' it might be—didn't I do all my possible to git justice done for ye?"

"You did. I've heard all—everything that has happened. Too much I've heard. Oh God! look there! Her grave—my murdered mother!"

"That's true. It killed the poor lady, sure enough."

"Yes; he killed her."

"I needn't ax who you refer to. I heerd you mention the name as I got up. We all know that Dick Darke has done whatever hez been done. We hed put him in prison, but the skunk got away from us, by the bribin' o' another skunk like hisself. The two went off thegither, an' no word's ever been since heerd 'bout eyther. I guess they've put for Texas, whar every scoundrel goes nowadays."

"You may be sure he has gone there, Simeon Woodley."

"Sure! You know it then?"

"I do not know it for certain; but I've good reason to think so. No matter about that now."

"Wal, Lordy! I'm so gled to see ye still alive. Won't you tell me how it's all kim about? But fust say, why are ye despleezed at meetin' me—me that mayent be the grandest, but sartinty one o' the truest an' fastest o' your friends?"

"I believe you are, Woodley—am sure of it. And, now that I think more of the matter, I'm not sorry at having met you. Rather should I be glad of it; for I feel that I can depend upon you."

"Ye may stake y'ur life on that. But why had you any misdoubts about me?"

"None about you in particular. No, nothing of that."

"Then there's some mystery o' a general karackter. Trust ole Sime Woodley. Don't be afeerd to tell him the hul thing. Maybe, he kin be a help to ye."

For a moment Clancy seemed as if considering. They had stepped off some paces from the grave, and now stood under the shadow of a tree. Clancy had made this movement, conducting the other into the darkness, the moment

Armstrong false to him, and having favored his rival. As yet, Darke's possession of her picture was to him unexplained. Second, there was the revenge for his own wrongs—for the attempt at assassinating him. No matter of its having failed, the criminality was the same.

But it had not failed in regard to his mother. There lay she in the cold grave close by; and this was his third, and strongest motive for making that vow of vengeance the hunter had overheard.

To Woodley he now communicated his determination, after giving a brief detail of what had happened to him since they had last seen each other. He declared it to be his fixed intention to proceed to Texas in quest of the man who had so grievously injured him. In fine, he appealed to the brave backwoodsman to be the companion of his pursuit—and assist him in searching for the assassin.

"The poor old place!" he said, pointing to the deserted dwelling. "It's no more mine. Everything sold off, as I've heard. Fortunately, he

Texas it is different. There, if I can meet him— But we only lose time in talking. You say, Woodley, you will go with me?"

"In course I've sayerd it, and I'll do as I've sayerd. There's no backin' out in this child. Besides, I war jest thinkin' o' a return to Texas, afore I see'd you. An' thar's another 'll go along wi' us; that's young Ned Heywood, a friend o' yourn most as much as myself. Ned's been wantin' had to steer torst the Lone Star State for some time. So, thar'll be three o' us on the trail o' Dick Darke."

"There will be four of us."

"Four! Who's the t'other, may I ax?"

"A man I've sworn to take to Texas along with me. A brave, noble man, though his skin be— But never mind now. I'll tell you all about it by and by. Meahwhile we must get ready. There's not a moment to lose. A single day wasted, and I may be too late to settle scores with Richard Darke. There's some one else in danger from him; one I would still save, notwithstanding—"



A RETREAT PREVENTED.—Page 32.

after their meeting. He had regretted the encounter with Woodley, not wishing to be seen by any one.

This was his first thought, which, after a moment's reflection, became changed; and he was now satisfied at seeing Woodley by his side. The latter's presence suggested an idea that had not before occurred to him. This man's friendship, already tested and proved, might be made subservient to a purpose engrossing his whole thoughts, as it had done, ever since the hour of his return to consciousness, after that long horrid dream of delirium.

It was the purpose he had so solemnly proclaimed, while standing over his mother's grave, without thought of any one being near.

This threat against Darke was due to three distinct passions, any one of them sufficient to impel to its execution. First, jealousy in its direst form—the sting from a love promised, and unbestowed. For he still believed Helen

who thought he had killed, did not also think of robbing me. There were two or three hundred dollars on my person, at the time he shot me down. They are on it still. That will take both of us to Texas. Once there, it will go hard with hunters such as we if we can't support ourselves by our guns. Simeon Woodley, will you go with me to Texas?"

"To Texas, or the devil, in a cause such as yourn, Charley Clancy! Sime Woodley wouldn't deserve the name o' man, to hang back on a trail like that. But, say! don't ye think we'd be more likely o' findin' the game by stayin' hyar? Ef ye make it known that you're still alive, then thar ain't been no murder done, an' Dick Darke 'll be sure to kum back to the settlement."

"If he did come back, what could I do? Shoot him down like a dog, as he thought he had me? That would make me a murderer, with good chance of being hanged for it. In

Here Clancy's utterance became indistinct, as if his voice was stifled by some strong emotion. Woodley suspected the cause, but refrained from asking for an explanation.

"Wal," he said, "I reckon you'll have a good chance to meet Dick Darke thar, an' then—"

"Meet him!" exclaimed Clancy, without waiting for the backwoodsman to finish his speech. "I'm sure of meeting him. I know the spot where he will be found, and from which he will not willingly part. Ah, Simeon Woodley! 'tis a wicked world! Murderer as that man is, or supposed to be, there's a woman gone to Texas who will welcome him, and receive him red-handed, as he is, with open arms; ay, willingly fling them around his neck. Oh God! oh God!"

"What woman? Who do ye speak o', Clancy?"

"Of her who has been the cause of all—Helen Armstrong."

"Wal; ye speak the truth partwise—but

only partwise. Thar can be no doubt o' Miss Armstrong's bein' the innercent cause of most o' what's been dud. But as to her hev'in' a likin' for Dick Darke, or puttin' them soft, white arms o' hern aroun' him, thar you're cl'ar off o' the track—a millions o' miles off it. That 'ere gurl hates the very sight o' the man, as Sime Woodley hev' good reason to know. An' I know, too, that she's nuts on another man—leastwise, has been afore all this happened, and I reck'n, still continue to be. Weemen—that air, weemen o' her kidney—ain't so changeable as people supposes. 'Bout Miss Helen Armstrong hev'in' once been inclined to'ardst this other man, an' ready to freeze to him, I hev' the proof in my pocket."

"The proof! What are you speaking of?"

"A dockymment, Charley Clancy, that shed hev reached you long ago, seein' that it's got your name on it. Thar's both a letter and a picter'. To examine 'em, we must have a cl'arer light than what's unner this tree, or kin be got out o' that 'ere moon. S'pose we adjern to my shanty. Thar we kin set the logs a-bleezin'. When they throw thar glint on the bit o' paper I've spoke about, I'll take long odds you won't be so down in the mouth. Come along, Charley Clancy! Ye've had a durned dodrotted deal both o' sufferin' an' sorrow. Cheer up, now! Sime Woodley's got somethin' that's likely to put ye straight upright on your pins. It's only a bit o' paste-board an' a sheet o' paper—both inside what, in Natchez, they calls a envelope. Come wi' me to the ole cabin, an' thar you kin take a squint at 'em."

Clancy's heart was too full to make rejoinder—full of guesses and mysterious imaginings. The words of Woodley had inspired him with new hope. Health, long doubtful, seemed suddenly to be restored to him. The color came back to his cheeks; and, as he followed the hunter to his hut, his stride exhibited all its old vigor and elasticity.

When the burning logs were kicked into a blaze; when, by its light, he read Helen Armstrong's letter, and looked upon her photograph—on that sweet inscript intended for himself—he was no longer the sad, despairing invalid, but—face and figure both showing it—the proud, triumphant lover.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"ACROSS THE SABINE."

In the days when Texas was an independent Republic, and not, as now, a State of the Federal Union, the phrase, "Across the Sabine," was one of peculiar signification. The river so called was the boundary between the Lone Star Republic, and that of the United States; as it still is between the present States of Texas and Louisiana.

The significance lay in the fact, that fugitives from States' justice, once over the Sabine, felt themselves safe; extradition laws being somewhat loose in the letter, and still looser in the spirit, when any attempt was made to carry them into execution.

As a consequence, the escaped criminal, after crossing the Sabine river, could breathe freely however compromising the character of his crime. Even the murderer might almost imagine that the weight of guilt was lifted from off his soul, as soon as he set foot on its western, or Texas, bank.

Some twenty-four hours after the Choctaw Chief had witnessed the departure of Borlasse, with the half score loose fellows who appeared o be his confederates, a party of horsemen, of about the same number, was seen crossing the Sabine toward the Texan side.

The place where they were making passage was not the usual ford taken by travelers—that of the old Spanish military road, between Natchitoches and Nacogdoches—but at a point several miles above the latter, where the stream, at certain seasons, was fordable. This crossing place was approached through a track of pine-forest, along a trail little used by travelers; still less by those who entered Texas with an honest intent, or left behind them, in the States, an unblemished reputation.

That the party of horsemen spoken of was neither doing one, nor the other, could have been told at a glance. They had no wagons, or other wheeled vehicles, to give them the semblance of emigrants; no baggage of any kind to embarrass them on their march. Without it, they might be explorers, land speculators, land surveyors, or hunters. But, no. They had not the look of men who belonged to any of these respectable callings; no resemblance to aught either honest, or honorable. In all there were twelve of them; and among the twelve there was not a face that did not speak of the Penitentiary—not one that did not brighten up, and show more cheerful, when the hoofs of their horses struck the Texan bank of the Sabine.

When still upon the *terrain* of Louisiana, they had been riding fast and hard; silent, and with pent-up thoughts, as if pursuers were behind them. On touching Texan soil all seemed to breathe freely; as if conscious they had at length reached a haven of safety.

Then, he who appeared to be the leader of the party, reining up his horse, broke silence thus: "Boys! I reckon we may take a spell o' rest

here. We're now on Texan ground, inside the boundary o' the Lone Star State, whar freemen needn't feel afeard. If thar's been any fools followin' us, I guess they'll take good care to keep on t'other side o' the river. Therefor', let's dismount and have a nap under the shadder o' these trees. After we've done that, we can talk about what's to be our next move. For my part, I feel as sleepy as a 'possum. That ar lickin' o' the Choctaw Chief allers knocked me up for a day or two. This time, our young friend Phil Quantrell, here, has given me a double dose. I guess I won't get over it for a week."

It is scarcely necessary to say the speaker was Borlasse, or that the men spoken to were his fellow-roysterers in the low hostelry of Natchitoches.

To a man, they all made affirmative response. Like himself they too were fatigued; dead done up by nearly twenty hours in the saddle, to say nothing about the debilitating effects of their debauch, or that they had been riding with their beards upon their shoulders, under the apprehension of a sheriff and posse being behind them.

During the period of their sojourn in Natchitoches, nearly every one of them had committed some crime that rendered him amenable to the laws.

Their object in having paid a visit to the place might have been innocent enough; or, at all events, appeared so, notwithstanding their rough exterior and boisterous behavior. At that time Natchitoches was a true frontier town; and almost every day it witnessed an arrival and departure of characters that might well be called "queer," both as to dress and discipline. Among these the guests of the Choctaw Chief would not have attracted particular attention. Like the sailor in port, when paid off and with full pockets—making every effort to deplete them—so is the trapper during his stay at a fort, or frontier town. He does things that seem odd; are odd, to the extreme of eccentricity.

Borlasse and his band had done all this in Natchitoches, and something more. As already said, nearly every one of them had been guilty of a deed that endangered his personal liberty.

Their leader alone had kept clear of such entanglements; and it was to save his confederates, rather than himself, he had so hastily decamped from the place.

His visit to Natchitoches had not been made for mere pleasure. It was business that had taken him thither; to concoct a scheme of scoundrelism such as might be supposed unknown among Anglo-Saxon people, and practiced only by those of Latinic descent, who dwell on the southern side of the Rio Grande.

But robbery is not confined to any race; and on the far frontier of western civilization may be found brigandage as rife, and as ruthless, as in the Sierra Moreno, or the mountains of the Abruzzi.

It was a scheme of this kind Captain Borlasse contemplated, and the planning of which had taken him to the town of Natchitoches.

That he had succeeded in arranging things to his satisfaction might be told from his hilarious demeanor.

He again opened converse with his confederates, after they had awakened from their siesta under the trees.

"Boys!" he said, calling them around him, "we've got a big thing now, that'll beat horse-ropin' all to shucks. Most o' ye, I reckon, know what I mean; 'ceptin', perhaps, our new friends here, who've late joined us."

The speaker looked toward Phil Quantrell, alias Dick Darke, and another man of about the same age, passing under the assumed name of Walsh; but whom Darke, in whispers, addressed as Harkness. He was Joe Harkness, the ex-jailer.

After resting his glance upon the two for an instant, Borlasse continued:

"I'll take charge o' tellin' *them* in good time; an' I think, can answer for their standin' by us in the bizness. Thar's fifty thousand dollars, cl'ar cash, at the bottom of it; besides sundries in the clothin' an' trinket line."

"The question then is," he continued, "whether we'd best wait, till this nice assortment o' property gets conveyed to the place intended for its destination; or whether we oughter make a try to pick it up while on the way. What say ye, fellars? Let every man speak his mind on the subject; then I'll give you mine."

"You're sure o' whar they're goin', captin'?" asked one of the band of freebooters, who appeared to understand something about the proprietorship of the booty described. "You know the place?"

"Bett'r'n I know the spot we're now campin' on. Ye needn't let that trouble ye. An' most all o' ye know it yourselves. As good luck has it, 'tain't over twenty mile from our old stamperin' groun' o' last year. I needn't tell any o' ye about whar that is. Thar, if we let 'em alone, everythin' air sure to be lodged, 'ithin less'n a month from now. Thar, we'll find the specie, stock, trinkets, an' other fixin's, not forgettin' the petticoats—sure as eggs is eggs. To some among

ye, it may appear only a question o' time and patience. In my opinion, it's somethin' more."

"But say, captin'! Why should we wait till they get all the way there? Are you quite certain they're bound for the place you speak of?"

These questions were put simultaneously, by several of the men.

"Boys! Jim Borlasse ain't no jackass, is he? I reckon you'll acknowledge that?"

"We do."

"Well; I'll answer all you've asked, in a lump. First place, I *am* sure about the destination o' that party o' travelers. I did'n't leave Naketosh, spite the way we war hurried off, till I'd fixed the bearin's o' this bizness. As I've told you, we'll find the whole plunder safe out thar—safe as if we'd ourselves conveyed it. Now, as to our bein' patient and waitin' till it arrives, thar's something more to be said. It's jest a question whether we *could* capter it on the road. Thar's only twelve o' us, all counted—twelve good and dependable men, it's true. But this emigratin' party ain't o' the ordinary kind. Thar's a whole colony o' them comin' out. The twelve o' us ain't strong enough to attack them—that is, with a sartinty o' succeedin'. We might manage, havin' a run of good luck; but we might get rubbed out by the luck goin' against us. The Mississippi planter, broken down though he be, hez seen campaignin' times wi' General Jackson. He's got a good deal o' Old Hickory grit in him, and ain't likely to go to sleep 'ithout keepin' one o' his eyes open. Besides, he's engaged a big crowd to go along wi' him—some o' them as I know that would be ugly customers in a skirmish. I tell ye, boys, there'd be no chance for us to touch them on the way. We'd only make a durned mess of it; lose our opportunity; and like enough get our necks into the loop-end o' a laryette. Tharfor', to conclude, say I, let's get on ahead o' them; gather our fellows as we go further south. I know o' six now sportin' themselves in San Antone. When we've enough thegither, then let's look out for the fifty thousand shiners. It'll give a tol'able good divide; and among the colonisers, as they war callin' themselves when we left Naketosh, I reckon we'll all o' us find a partner apiece. Thar's boun' to be a good grist o' sheemales among 'em. I can say, for our young friend here, Mr. Quantrell, thar's a bit o' dimity in that crowd he's willin' to foller, wherever it may lead—if need be, to the end o' eternity."

Without waiting for Quantrell's rejoinder to this coarse sally, the brigand continued:

"Well, boys, what say you? Shall we first go straight on to San Antone? After that, to the place where we are to pick up the shiners?"

"For San Antone first," responded his following, in chorus; "then for the shiners!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

EMIGRANTS EN ROUTE.

COLONEL ARMSTRONG was not long in completing his plans of colonization. His resources as an old soldier—an officer of note in the Creek and Cherokee war—with his good reputation generally, induced many first-class fighting-men as well as first-class families, to join him. Dupre's great wealth smoothed every difficulty, and rendered the preparations easy. So that soon after the scenes described as occurring in Natchitoches, a grand wagon-train, with all the paraphernalia required to establish a new settlement, filed off from this frontier town, head turned toward Texas.

Passing through the pine forests of North-western Louisiana, it crossed the Sabine at the fording place of the old Spanish military road, which runs between the towns of Natchitoches and Nacogdoches.

Once upon the soil of Texas, the train went journeying on: for it had a far distance to go; days and weeks of travel, toward what was then wildest west—the furthest border-land of Texan colonization.

There was much toil to be endured, and some peril encountered before reaching the goal of their journey. But no thought of either daunted the hearts of the emigrants. They were on their way to a new home, having left the old one behind. And along with it a thousand cankering cares—perhaps the half of a life spent in severe struggles and painful disappointments.

In the untried field before them there was hope, and, it might be, success and splendor. It was like renewing their lease of life—the youngest to find fresh joys, and the oldest to grow young again.

All seemed happy; and as the long row of white-tilted wagons wound its way through shadowy forests, or over sunlit prairies, throughout resounded the gay joke and jovial laugh; while around the fires of the night camp cheerful faces reflected the blaze of burning logs, or in terpsichorean movement, feet kept time to the inspiring strains of trumpet and violin.

The banjo, too, might be heard, its player encircled by a dark-skinned crowd, mirthful—ay, even more so than their masters. Strange it is: a life-time of bondage does not stifle merriment in the heart of the Ethiopian. Grace of God, grand, glorious compensation for his miseries

endured from the day when that fatal curse was pronounced on Canaan—as it were from the doom of creation!

As I have said, all in Colonel Armstrong's emigrant party appeared happy. And were so, with perhaps only one exception. This was his own daughter.

Not the younger one; for Jessie had no cause to do otherwise than share the general joy, as she did. She had reason to be more mirthful than any, and she was. Her Creole lover—her Louis—was ever by her side; scarce for a moment forsaking her. He was now her *fiancé*, his troth plighted, his truthfulness beyond suspicion. They were all but man and wife, which they would soon be—as soon, as the new home should be reached.

By invitation of Dupre, a clergyman accompanied the party, ostensibly to administer to the spiritual wants of the colonists, but in reality to tie the knot that would unite him to his golden-haired sweetheart. It was to be done soon after the day of arrival. So that the goal of their journey, was to be also the climax of his life's happiness.

It was not, then, Colonel Armstrong's younger daughter who was an exception to the general joy; but Helen, the elder one. She was indeed sad. Her heart, that had received so many shocks, was now a prey to the supremest suffering human heart can endure. It was that called *melancholia*; although this word can convey but a slight idea of its meaning. Only they who have known it—fortunately but few—can understand the terror—the woe—wasting misery felt by those whose nerves have been unstrung by some terrible misfortune. It is the story of a broken heart.

Byron has told us, that "the heart may break, and brokenly live on." He means that the body may live on. But the heart—can this, once broken, ever be restored to wholeness? Yes; it can. And how? By a new hope inspiring it. By the knowledge that what caused it to succumb was a fanciful, not a real woe. This may bring it back to its old ways, to its pleasant pristine beatings.

But Helen Armstrong had no such hope to sustain, or restore hers. Her lover—he who had become sole lord of her heart—the noble, handsome fellow, whose image filled every outline of her fancy; a man, whom in her romantic imaginings, no woman could look upon without loving—he was dead: had been shot down, murdered, in the mud of a cypress swamp!

She knew not, that Charles Clancy was still living. She could not know; for, on leaving Natchitoches, the latest news told only of his death, and the escape of the criminal who killed him.

About the latter she had later news; but none to cheer her. That she had since seen the assassin, who for the second time had got away from pursuing justice, was no balm to the bitterness that was now making a burden of her life.

Traveling with the emigrant train, she and her sister occupied a *carriole*; a sort of half carriage, half spring-wagon, in use in the Southern States. It had a leather cover, with loose curtains of the same. When these were uplifted, which they rarely were, and only by intimate friends, there could be seen inside two women, both young, both beautiful; though of different styles of beauty: the one Spanish, dark; the other Saxon, or Scandinavian, fair. In yet greater contrast, the expression on their faces. On the one, the fair one, joy that sparkled as sunrise on a prairie bedecked with flowers; on the other, sadness, that seemed like a desert plain, over which the storm had passed—was still darkly passing.

CHAPTER XL.

THE HAND OF GOD.

THERE is no province in Spanish America without its "Colorado" river. The word signifies "colored with a tinge of red," and is applied to streams having this peculiarity. In Mexican territory—or what was once Mexican—there are several such streams. There is the great Colorado of the West, celebrated for its *canoned* channel, with banks rising a mile vertically above its bed; the Colorado, or Red Fork of the Arkansas; and the Colorado of Texas; with several others less known to general geography.

South America has also, in one place or another, half a score of streams bearing this synonym, so little distinctive.

In the case of the Texan Colorado the title is a somewhat ludicrous misnomer, bestowed by the Anglo-American settlers through a misapprehension of the old Spanish maps. The stream, so called by the Spaniards, was the present Brazos—more properly "Brazos de Dios"—while this, in turn, was the "Colorado." The misconception, that must have led to this transposal of names, is all the more remarkable from the fact, that the Texan Colorado is in reality a *clear-water* stream, times of freshet excepted; while the Brazos is a *muddy* river, with the reddish tint usually termed "Colorado."

Regarding the river now bearing the latter name as the real Brazos de Dios, there is a ro-

mantic chapter of history connected with its bestowal. I may briefly cite the episode, since it has a topographical bearing on certain incidents soon to be recounted.

It is well known that Texas was first colonized by the Spaniards, on the "missionary system." Monks were sent into this province, carrying the cross in one hand, with soldiers at their back bearing the sword. Missions were founded in a sort of monasterial style, with dwellings for the *padres* who founded them, and churches for the Indians to be Christianized. Near by a military barrack, or "cuartel," was also established, bearing the title *presidio*, or garrison. Both *mission* and *presidio* were generally fortified; and with that keen look-out toward temporal enjoyment, which at all times, and in all countries, has characterized these spiritual teachers, their place of abode was chosen with an eye to the utile and comfortable, as also the picturesque. The mission buildings were on a magnificent scale—mansions, in short—with grand dining-halls, snug sitting and sleeping-chambers, well-paved courts, and often spacious gardens attached.

There was no difficulty in the holy fathers thus handsomely housing themselves. Their new-made neophytes did all the work, for the sake and in the name of "Sante Fe," into which they had been inducted.

The toil of the red-skinned converts did not cease when they had finished building the church and mission house. It was then transferred to the tillage of the surrounding land; and continued throughout their whole lives—not for their own benefit, but to enrich these idle and lazy friars, who were in many cases men of the most profligate character. It was, in fact, a system of slavery, based upon and sustained by religious fanaticism. Instead of civilizing the aborigines of America, it but brutalized them the more, by eradicating from their hearts whatever of savage virtue they had, and implanting in its place the most debasing bigotry and superstition.

Most American writers, who speak of these missionary establishments, have formed an erroneous estimate of them. And, what is worse, have given it to the world. Many of these writers are, or were, officers in the United States army, sent to explore the wild territories in which the missions existed. Having received their education in Roman Catholic seminaries, they have been inducted into taking a lenient view of the doings of the "old Spanish padres." Hence their testimony too favorable to the system.

The facts are all against them. These show that it was a scheme of *villeinage*, more oppressive than the European serfdom of the Middle Ages. Its issue is sufficient proof of this. It was falling to pieces long before the Anglo-Saxon race showed itself on the territory where it had once flourished. The missions are now in a state of decadence, their buildings going to decay; while the red-man, disgusted at the attempt to enslave, under the cloak of Christianizing him, has returned, or is rapidly returning, to his idolatry, as also to his savage life.

One of these missions had been established on the San Saba river, a beautiful stream, tributary to the Colorado of Texas. For a considerable time it had held a prosperous existence, and numbered among its neophytes many Indians of the *Lipano* and *Comanche* tribes.

But the tyranny of the monkish missionaries, by their exactions of tithes and almost continual toil—themselves living in luxurious ease, and without much regard to that continence they inculcated—at length provoked their red-skinned converts to revolt. In which they were aided by those Indians who had remained unconverted, and still heretically roamed around the neighborhood.

The consequence was: that, on a certain day, when the hunters of the *mission* were abroad, and the soldiers of the *presidio* alike absent on some expedition, a band of the outside idolaters, in league with the discontented neophytes, entered the mission building, with arms concealed under their ample cloaks of buffalo-skin. After prowling about for a while in an insolent manner, they at length, at a given signal from their chief, attacked the proselytizing *padres*, with those converts who adhered to them; tomahawked and scalped all who came in their way.

It is but the old story of Indian retaliation to say, that the women and children were massacred along with the men.

One of the monks escaped by stealing off at the commencement of the slaughter—a man of great repute in those early times of Texas. He succeeded in making his way down the valley of the San Saba, keeping the right bank of the river. But to reach an asylum of safety it was necessary for him to cross the greater stream, to which the San Saba is tributary—the Colorado. In this there was a freshet at the time; and its current was so swollen that neither man nor horse could have forded it.

The *padre* stood upon its bank, looking covetously across, and listening in terror to the sounds heard behind. These were the war-cries of the pursuing Comanches.

For a moment the monk believed himself lost. But, just then, the arm of God was extended to

protect him. It was done in a fashion somewhat difficult to give credence to, though easy enough for believers in the Holy Faith. It was a mere miracle; not stranger or more apocryphal than we hear of every day in France, Spain, or Italy. The only singularity about the Texan miracle was the fact of its not being original; for it was a pure piracy from Sacred Writ—that passage of it which describes the crossing of the Red Sea by Moses and his Israelites.

The Spanish monk stood on the river's bank, his eyes fixed despairingly on its deep, rapid-running current, which he knew he could not cross without the danger of being drowned. But just at this crisis he saw the waters separate. The current was suddenly stayed, and the pebbly bed became dry!

Tucking his gown under his girdle, he struck into the channel; and, no doubt, making good time—though the legend does not speak of this—he succeeded in planting his sandaled feet dry shod on the opposite shore!

So far the Texan story closely corresponds with the Mosaic. Beyond, the incident, as related, is slightly different. Pharaoh's following host was overwhelmed by the closing waters. The pursuing Comanches did not so much as enter the charmed stream, whose channel had filled up and was again running rapidly on. They were found next morning, upon the same shore where they had arrived in pursuit, all dead, all lying at full stretch along the sward, with their heads turned in the same direction, like trees struck down by a tornado!

Only the Omnipotent could have done this. No mortal hand could have made such a *coup*. Hence the name which the Spaniards bestowed upon the river, *Brazos de Dios*—literally, "the arm of God." Hence also the history, or rather fable, intended to awe the minds of the rebellious converts, and restore them to Christianity, or serfdom. Which it did not: since from that day the mission of San Saba has remained a ruin.

It was to this desolate spot—which had no need to be desolate, since it was fertile, picturesque, possessing all the advantages required for a prosperous settlement—that Colonel Armstrong intended conducting his colony. His future son-in-law—a sort of Croesus, as described—had purchased a large tract of territory around one of the deserted *missions*; which, still standing, only needed some repairs to convert it into a comfortable dwelling-place.

There, more than a century before, the monks had made halt, with the cross held conspicuously in one hand, and the sword secretly carried in the other.

There are now approaching the same spot a new invasion—that of the axe and rifle—neither ostentatiously paraded, but neither perfidiously concealed.

CHAPTER XLI.

A REPENTANT SINNER.

ABOUT three weeks after Borlase and his brigands had crossed the Sabine, continuing on for the south-western settlements of Texas, a second party might have been seen traveling along the same trail through the forests of Louisiana—their faces set toward the same fording-place.

In number they were but a third of that comprising the band of Borlase; as there were only four of them. Three were on horseback, the fourth bestriding a mule.

The three horsemen were white; the mule-rider a mulatto.

The latter rode a little behind; the distance, as also a certain air of deference—to say nothing of his complexion—showing him to be a slave.

Still further rearward, and seemingly careful to keep beyond kicking reach of the hybrid's heels, trotted a dog—a deerhound.

The reader is already acquainted with the men comprising this second party, as also with the dog that accompanied it. The three white men were Charles Clancy, Simeon Woodley, and Ned Heywood. He with the tawny skin was Jupiter, Ephraim Darke's absconded slave. The dog was Clancy's; the same he had with him when shot down by Richard Darke.

Having reached the river and crossed it, they made halt on the Texan side. Their movements showed caution, coupled with some signs of anxiety; as if they, too, were troubled with an apprehension of being pursued. It was, however, unlike that portrayed by Borlase and his band—the reason being altogether different. None of the white men had reason to fear for himself. Their anxiety was about the mulatto; a fugitive slave whom they were assisting in his escape from slavery, by taking him along with them to the far free frontierland, beyond reach of the most enterprising negro-catcher.

Not for this reason, alone, were they entering Texas by a route described as rarely taken by the honest traveler. They had another and stronger one. They were on the track of Richard Darke.

While passing through Natchitoches, they too had put up at the Choctaw Chief. Their plans required privacy; and for this the suburban hostelry exactly suited them. Clancy's scheme of vengeance might be thwarted were it known

that he still lived. It was as yet only known to those who were his traveling companions. Besides, there was Jupiter to be thought of; and the fugitive slave's freedom would not have continued long, had he been paraded conspicuously in the streets of Natchitoches, or seen at any hotel patronized by planters.

At the Choctaw Chief they had stayed only a single night; but during that time was obtained all the information they needed.

As chance would have it, Johnny, the bar-keeper of doubtful nationality, had been insulted by Borlasse, just as the latter was leaving. Whether Hibernian or not, he wielded a tongue free as that of any Irishman. This, further loosened by the rancor that remained, was wagged close to the ear of Simeon Woodley—who chanced to be an old customer of the tavern—until the hunter was fully informed of all that had taken place under the roof of the Choctaw Chief, in connection with Borlasse and his band. What had occurred outside the hostelry everybody in Natchitoches knew. The grand colonizing scheme of Colonel Armstrong, in company with the young planter, Dupre—its organization and departure for Texas about a week before—had been the events of the time, just then ceasing to be talked of in hotels, taverns, restaurants, and streets.

Colonel Armstrong's wagon train had gone by the main road into Texas. This everybody knew. But only Johnny could tell the route taken by the band of Borlasse. He overheard them speaking of it before starting.

He had further informed Woodley, that a stranger calling himself Quantrell, very free with his money, had gone with them. As also another, whose name Johnny had not heard. He gave Quantrell's description. Notwithstanding certain discrepancies, Woodley could identify him as Dick Darke. The other should be Harkness.

This was enough to determine the route Clancy and his traveling companions were to take. And they had taken it.

Just as Borlasse and his fellows, on reaching the Texan side, sought relaxation under the shadow of the trees, so did they.

And there, as they sat together on the trunk of a prostrate pine, smoking their pipes, after a refection of corn-bread and cold boiled bacon, Simeon Woodley unburdened himself of the secrets he had drawn from the barkeeper.

"Fellurs!" said he, addressing his speech to his two traveling companions of white complexion—the mulatto still keeping respectfully apart—"we're now on a spot whar, 'bout three weeks ago, sot, or stood, two o' the darndest rascals to be foun' e'ether in the States or Texas. You know one o' 'em, Ned Heywood, but not the t'other. Charley Clancy hev akwaintance wi' both, an' a ugly reccoleckshun o' them inter the bargain. Thar names air Jim Borlasse an' Dick Darke."

"But are you sure they've been here?" asked Clancy, without waiting for the hunter to conclude his speech.

"Sartin. From what that fox Johnny tolt me, they must a' tuk this trail. An' as they had to make quick tracks arter leevin' Naketosh, they'd be tired on gettin' this fur, an' good as sartin to lay up a bit. Look! thar's the ashes o' thar fire, whar I s'p'ose they cooked somethin'. There hain't been a critter crossed the river since the big rain, else we'd 'a' see'd hoss-tracks along the trail. They started jest the day afore the rain, and that 'ere fire was put out by it. Ye kin tell by the way them chunks show only half consumed. Yis, by the Eternall! Roun' the bleeze o' them sticks has sot seven, eight, nine, or may be a dozen, o' the most preeshus scoundrels as ever made crossin' o' the Sabine; an' that's sayin' a goodish deal. Two o' them I kin sw'ar to bein' scoundrels, an' I reckon a third. The rest may be counted the same from their kump'ny—that kump'ny bein' Jim Borlasse."

"Who is the third man you speak about?" asked Clancy.

"Him as let Dick Darke out o' the jail—Joe Harkness. Johnny's description o' the man warn't very cl'ar; but I know 'twar Harkness, for all that. It's bound to 'a' been him. Arter what he did, whar else w'd he be likely to go—'ceptin' along wi' Darke? A poor, weak-witted eedyot, he air; an' ef ole Eph's gi'n him any money for gettin' Dick out o' the jail—which, in coorse, he must 'a' dud—Jim Borlasse's lot 'll soon ease him o' it."

For a short interval the conversation was suspended; the three who took part in it separately reflecting on what was before them.

Then Woodley, after taking a pull from the whisky-flask, with which Clancy had presented him, resumed speech in the interrogative:

"Now, boys, what's to be our next move? That's the question."

The others refrained from making answer. They trusted to the old hunter to direct them.

He understood their complimentary silence, and continued:

"In my opeenyun, our best plan will be to go straight on to whar Kurnel Armstrong intends plantin' his sticks. I know the place 'most as well as the public squar' o' Natchez. This chile intends jeinin' the ole kurnel anyhow; an' so do

you, Ned Heywood. As for you, Charley Clancy, we know whar you want to go, an' the game ye intend trackin' up. Wal, ef you'll put trust in what Sime Woodley say, he sez this: ye'll find that game in the neighborhood o' Helen Armstrong; nigh to her as it may dar' ventur'."

The hunter's speech had an inflammatory effect upon Clancy. He sprung up from the log, and strode over the ground, with a wild look and strangely excited air. He seemed impatient to get back into the saddle.

Woodley continued: "In coorse we'll foller the trail o' Borlasse an' his lot. It air sure to lead to the same place. What they're arter 'tain't eazy to tell. Some deviltry, for sartin. Jim Borlasse purtend to make a livin' by ropin' wild horses? I guess he gits more by takin' them as air tame; as you an' I, Clancy, hev reeson to know. I harn't no doubt he'd do wuss than that, ef opportunity offered. Thar's been more'n one case o' highway robbery out thar in West Texas, on emigrant people goin' that way; an' I don't know anybody likelier than him to take a hand in that sort o' thing. Ef Kurnel Armstrong's party wa'n't so strong as 'tis, an' the kurnel hisself a' old campayner, I mout 'a' had fear for 'em. I reckon they're safe enuf. Borlasse and his fellows won't dar' to tech 'em. Johnny ses thar war but ten or twelve in all. Still, tho' they moun't openly attack the wagon train, thar's jest a chance o' their hangin' on its skirts, an' stealin' somethin' out o' it. Ye heerd in Naketosh that a young Creole planter, by name Dupray, is gone wi' Kurnel Armstrong, an's tuk a big count o' dollars 'long wi' him. Thet 'u'd be jest the thing to temp' Jim Borlasse; an' as for Dick Darke, thar's somethin' else to temp' him. So—"

"Woodley!" exclaimed Clancy, without waiting for the hunter to conclude, "let us be off. Sime, for God's sake, let us go!"

His comrades could divine the cause of Clancy's impatience. They made no attempt to restrain him. They had rested and refreshed themselves. There was no reason for remaining any longer on the ground; and they were ready to resume their journey.

Rising simultaneously, each unhitched his horse, and stood by the stirrup, taking in the slack of their bridle-reins.

Before they could mount into their saddles, the deer-hound sprung from their midst, at the same time giving out a growl that told of some one approaching.

The stroke of a hoof proclaimed him on horse-back; and the next moment he was seen coming through the trees.

Apparently undaunted, he rode on toward their camp ground; but when near enough to have a fair view of their faces, he suddenly reined up, and showed signs of a desire to retreat. If this was his intention, he was too late.

Before he could turn his horse a rifle was leveled, its barrel bearing straight upon his body; while a voice sounded threateningly in his ear, in a clear tone, pronouncing the words:

"Keep your ground, Harkness! If you ride back I'll put a bullet through you—sure as my name's Clancy."

The threat was sufficient. Harkness—for it was he—ceased tugging upon his rein, and permitted his horse to stand still.

Then, at a second command from Woodley, accompanied by a similar menace, he urged his animal into motion, and came on to the place of bivouac.

In two minutes more he was in their midst, dismounted, and on his knees piteously appealing for mercy.

The ex-jailer's story was soon told, and told without much reservation. The man who had connived at Richard Darke's escape, and made money by the connivance, was now more than repentant for his dereliction of duty. A poor weak-witted fellow, as Simeon Woodley had described him, he had not only been bullied by Borlasse's band, but stripped of his ill-gotten gains. Still more, he had been beaten, and otherwise so roughly handled, that he was glad to get clear of their company. At the first chance, he had stolen away from their camp—while the scoundrels were asleep—and was now returning along the same trail they had taken through Texas. He was on his way back to the States, with not much left him, except a very sorry horse, and a sorrowful heart.

His captors soon discovered that, along with his sorrow, there was a strong commingling of spite against his late associates. Against Darke, in particular, who had proved ungrateful for the service done him.

All this did Harkness communicate to them with something besides.

Something that drove Charles Clancy well-nigh mad; and made a very vivid impression upon his traveling companions.

After hearing it, all sprung instantly to their saddles, and spurred off along the trail into Texas; Harkness, as commanded, following at their horses' heels. This he did without daring to disobey; trotting after, in company with the dog, seemingly less cur than himself.

Clancy had no fear of his falling back. That rifle, whose barrel had been already borne upon him, could be again brought to the level in an instant of time.

The thought held Harkness as secure, as if a trail-rope attached him to the tail of Clancy's horse.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE PRAIRIE SEA.

A RIVER running through meadows, on which scythe of mower has never cut sward, nor hay-maker set foot; meadows loaded with such luxuriance of verdure—greenest, tallest grass—that tons of hay might be garnered off a single acre; meadows of such extent, that in speaking of them you may not use the words acres, but miles; and even this will but faintly convey an idea of their immensity.

To the seeming they have no boundary save the blue sky—no limit nearer than the horizon. And since to the eye of the traveler this keeps continually changing, he may well believe they have no limit at all, and fancy himself moving in the midst of a green sea, boundless as ocean itself, his horse being the boat in which he has embarked.

In places this extended surface presents a somewhat monotonous aspect, though it is not so everywhere. Here and there it may be seen pleasantly interspersed with trees, some standing solitary, but mostly in groves, copses, or belts, these looking, for all the world, like islands in the ocean. So perfect is the resemblance, that this very name has been given them, by men of Norman and Saxon race; whose ancestors, after crossing the Atlantic, carried into the colonies many ideas of the mariner, with much of his nomenclature. To them the isolated groves are "islands;" larger tracts of timber, seen afar, are "land;" narrow spaces between are "straits;" and indentations along their edges "bays."

To carry the analogy further, the herds of buffalo, with bodies half buried in the tall grass, might be likened to "schools" of whales; the wild horses to porpoises at play; the deer to dolphins; and the fleet antelopes to flying-fish.

Completing the figure, we have the vultures soaring above, performing the part of predatory sea-gulls; the eagle representing the rarer frigate-bird, or albatross.

In the midst of this verdant expanse, less than a quarter of a century ago man was rarely met; still more rarely civilized man; and rarer yet his dwelling-place. If at times he appeared among the prairie groves, he was not there as a sojourner—only a traveler, passing from place to place. The herds of cattle, with shaggy frontlets and humped shoulders—the droves of horses, long-tailed and with full flowing manes—the proud antlered stags, and prong-horned antelopes were not his. He had no control over them. The turf he trod was free to them for pasture, as to him for passage; and, as he made way through their midst, his presence scarce affrighted them. He and his might boast of being "war's arbiters," and lords of the great ocean. They were not lords of that emerald sea extending between the Sabine river and the Rio Grande. Civilized man had as yet but shown himself upon its shores.

Since then he has entered upon, and scratched a portion of its surface; though not much, compared with its immensity. There are still grand expanses of the Texan prairie unfurrowed by the plowshare of the colonist—almost untrod-den by the foot of the explorer. Even at this hour, the traveler may journey for days on grass-grown plains, amidst groves of timber, without seeing house, or so much as a chimney peering above the tree-tops. If he perceive a solitary smoke, curling skyward, he knows that it is over the camp-fire of some one, who is a wayfarer like himself.

And it may be above the bivouac of those he would do well to shun. For upon the green surface of the prairie, as upon the blue expanse of the ocean, all men met with are not honest. There be land-sharks, as well as water-sharks—prairie-pirates, as well as corsairs of the sea.

Something bearing resemblance to a band of such freebooters might have been seen moving over one of the prairies of Western Texas, about a month after Colonel Armstrong and his colonizing expedition took departure from the town of Natchitoches.

There were about twenty of them, mounted upon mustangs—the wild horses of Texas; though two or three rode larger and better stock—the breed of the States.

They appeared to be all Indians. Or, if there was a white man among them, he must have been sun-tanned beyond anything commonly seen. In addition to their natural tint of burnt umber, they were all glaringly painted; their faces streaked and escutcheoned with chalk-white, charcoal-black, and vermilion-red. As for their bodies, not much of them could be seen. Blankets of blue and scarlet, with buffalo-ropes and buckskin shirts, shrouded their shoulders; while breeches and leggings of the last-named material enwrapped their lower limbs; moccasins incasing their feet. In addition to their dress, they wore the usual Indian adorn-

ments. Stained eagle-plumes stood, tuft-like, out of their raven-black hair; which, falling in long tresses, swept back to the hips of their horses; while strings of peccaries' teeth, or claws of the grizzly bear, were suspended around their necks in bountiful profusion.

It is true, this was not a correct fighting costume. Nor would their toilet have betokened them on the "war-trail." But the Texan Indian does not always dress warrior-fashion, when he goes forth upon a predatory excursion. More rarely when it is a mere pilfering maraud, directed against some frontier settlement, or traveling party of whites. On such occasions he does not intend fighting, but would rather shun it. And, as thieving is more congenial to him, he can steal as adroitly in a buckskin hunting-shirt as with bare arms.

The Indians in question numbered too few for a war-party. At the same time, their being without women bespoke them on no errand of peace, nor honesty. But for the arms carried, they might have been mistaken for hunters. They had spears and guns, some of them

sterile, tract; which, rising terrace-like above the river valley, presents a steep facade toward it, almost throughout its whole course.

On each side of almost every Texan stream there is one or more of these cliff-like escarpments; their crests being but the termination of table plains, that extend back to an indefinite distance, or until they reach a similar stair descending into the valley of some other water-course.

Thus is it with the San Saba; the bluff-like elevation on its left or northern bank being but the abrupt ending of a plateau, that stretches across the angle between it and the Colorado.

Along the edge of this the Indian band was moving; for, as already said, the men composing it were mounted, and in motion. They were going at a slow pace, and keeping at some distance back from the crest of the escarpment. So far, that they could not have been seen from any part of the river bottom below.

One of them was on foot, pursuing a parallel line, and closer in to the edge. He was making his way, crouchingly, keeping among the dwarf

vehicles; distinguishable as wagons by their white canvas tilts—the latter contrasting with the surface of vivid green over which they were making way. Slowly crawling along, they bore similitude to a string of gigantic *termites* bent on some industrial excursion.

There could be no mistaking the spectacle. They who viewed it from the bluffs evidently understood what it was. A train of emigrant settlers, *en route* to the place of intended settlement.

It was a train unusually large, twenty wagons or more, with its proportion of people—men, women, and children. The forms of at least forty mounted men could be made out, riding in front, in rear, and alongside of it.

No wonder the twenty savage horsemen, who pursued the parallel line along the cliff, were taking care not to approach it too nearly.

One would suppose that from such a strong traveling party, their chance of obtaining plunder would be but a slight one.

And yet they did not appear to think so. For as the emigrant train tardily crept on up the



THE SKULKERS.

"bowie"-knives and pistols. But the Indian hunter still believes in the efficacy of the silent arrow; and not any of these carried either bow or quiver.

There were other signs about them which the ordinary traveler might not understand; but which to the eye of an old prairie man would be regarded as suspicious. Such a one would at once have pronounced them a band of *prairie pirates*, and of the most dangerous kind encountered on the plains of Texas.

The place where this painted cohort was seen was near the confluence of the two famed Texan rivers—San Saba and Colorado; where the former, after meandering through verdant meadows—one of the most beautiful prairie expanses in Texas—glides softly, like a shy bride, into the arms of the stronger-flowing stream.

The Indians were upon the left side of the San Saba, some miles above its mouth. But not on the river's bank, nor in any part of its wide "bottom-land."

They were moving along an upland, and more

cedars, that formed a *criniere* on the cliff. He thus commanded a view of the valley below, without danger of being himself seen.

At short intervals—every twenty minutes or so—he passed out, and made some communication to the others who made halt to hear. Then he would return to the cliff's edge, and continue on as before.

This odd movement was of itself sufficient to throw suspicion on the character of his comrades—almost declaring their design. They could only be watching a party of travelers—perhaps, with the intention of waylaying them.

Whatever their intention, a party of travelers it was. Below, in the San Saba bottom—afar off, though still on the nether side of the stream—could be seen a number of white objects, resembling tents set in a row. It required a prolonged observation to tell they were not tents, as also that they were in motion. For they were so; though moving as slowly as a train of siege artillery.

It could just be seen, that they were wheeled

valley, they, too, moved along the upper plain at a like rate of speed, their scout keeping the wagons in sight, and at intervals, as before, admonishing them of every movement made.

At certain points, where a thicker growth of timber favored their coming nearer to the cliff, the whole band would ride up to its edge and take a look at the wagon-train, surveying it with eyes in which could be read a hungry concupiscence.

Now clustered upon the cliff, now moving onward, again to make halt, the dusky savages resembled a flock of vultures hovering above a herd of deer, as if expecting some weak individual to be by chance disabled, and so become easy prey.

At a point where the wagon-train was compelled to make crossing of the river—the only fording-place for many miles—the Indians seemed to watch it with increased eagerness, as if with some thought of there attacking it.

If so, they allowed the opportunity to pass. One after another of the wagons went across

being for a time lost to view among the trees that bordered both banks. Soon after they reappeared on the opposite side, in line extended as before, continuing on up the valley.

And the skulkers also kept on; now not only the bluff, and half the river bottom, but the river itself, separating them from the caravan, on whose skirts they had been hanging since the earliest hour of dawn.

And they still kept on, watching the emigrant wagons until the sun sunk low—almost to the horizon. Then they halted upon a spot thickly beset with cedar-trees; a sort of promontory of the upper plain that projected over the river valley, commanding a view of it for miles.

On its opposite side they could see the wagons slowly crawling along; though now not all of them were in motion. Those in the lead had stopped, the others doing likewise, as, successively, they arrived at the stopping-place.

This was in front of a building, just discernible in the distance, and only half visible, the other half screened by surrounding trees. The part seen was a mass of mason-work, dark in hue, quadrangular in shape, almost windowless, with a crenelled parapet cresting its facade. Contiguous rose a tower, surmounted by what resembled a belfry. About both there was that look betokening neglect, or non-habitation; in short, the aspect of a ruin.

For it was a ruin—that of one of the old San Saba mission-houses.

And the men making halt before its walls were Colonel Armstrong and his fellow-colonists.

Who were they so suspiciously watching them? The sequel will show.

The emigrants, as they approached the place, coming up one after another, were full of high hopes. Their hearts were joyous, their voices gleeful. They had reached the goal of their journey.

For weeks the San Saba mission had been the topic of their discourse, the theme of almost hourly converse. They would re-people the deserted dwelling; restore it to its original splendor; once more bring its long-neglected fields into the tillage; and make fortunes out of them by the cultivation of cotton.

There was now no cloud to darken the horizon of their hopes. The long, difficult journey had been accomplished, and rejoicingly they hailed its termination. The head of their wagon-train had already made halt in front of the dilapidated building, soon to be restored to the comforts, if not the uses, of yore.

So reflected they, in full confidence of their future.

While thus reflecting, they who eyed them from afar appeared to indulge in a different forecast of that future. If looks might count for aught, those of that harpy-like band boded no good to Colonel Armstrong and his colony.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SAN SABA MISSION HOUSE.

THE ancient mission of San Saba, erst the abode of Spanish monks, now become the dwelling-place of the all-important Mississippi planter, calls for some words of description.

It stood on the right side of the river, several hundred yards back from the bank, on a platform slightly elevated above the general level of the surrounding terrain.

The site had been chosen for three distinct reasons—the first, sanitary; the second, for the fine prospect it afforded; and the third, to avoid the danger of inundation when the river was in flood.

In architectural style the mission house itself did not differ greatly from what may be seen in most Mexican haciendas.

It was a grand quadrangular structure, with an uncovered court in the center, known by the name of *patio*. Around this ran a covered gallery, or corridor, upon which opened the doors of the different apartments.

But a few windows looked outside; these being casements, unglazed, but protected against ingress by a *grille* of strong iron bars set vertically—the latter termed *reja*. In the center of its facade was a double door, of jail-like aspect, when open giving admittance to the passage-way, called *saguan*. Both doorway and passage were of sufficient capacity to admit a wagon with its load, being intended only for those grand old coaches such as lumbered along our own highways in the days of Dick Turpin, and in which Sir Charles Grandison used to ride. Vehicles of the exact size and pattern may be seen to this day rolling, or rather crawling, along the country roads of what was once New Spain—relics of luxurious grandeur elsewhere gone.

Behind the *patio* a second passage-way gave entrance to another and larger courtyard, devoted to stables, store-rooms, and other domestic offices. Still further back an inclosure of nearly an acre in extent was the *huerta* or garden. This, surrounded by a high wall of *adobe*, or sun-baked bricks, crested with a *chevaux-de-frise* of spinous cactus plants, was filled with fruit and flowering trees. These, once carefully cultivated, but for long time neglected, now covered the walk in wild luxuriance. Under their shade, silently treading with sandaled feet,

or reclining on rustic benches, the *padres* used to spend their idle hours—perhaps as pleasantly as their British brethren of Tintern and Tewkesbury. Often did the mission walls echo their “Ha, ha!” as they quaffed the choicest vintage of Xeres, and laughed “Ha, ha!” at jests less innocent than Texas, with its red-skinned aborigines, afforded them.

The mission dwelling-house was but one story in height, with a flat roof and parapet running around its outer edge; the latter giving it greater apparent elevation.

Near by stood the *capilla*, or chapel, a structure of more imposing appearance from having a tower and belfry—both *lezarde* from long neglect—while at some distance off was a collection of mud huts, formerly inhabited by the Indian converts attached to the establishment. This, called the *rancheria*, was screened from view of the mission-house by a thick grove of evergreen trees; the *padres* not relishing a too close contact with their half-naked neophytes, who were but their *peons*, laborers and slaves. In point of fact, it was but the feudal system of the Old World transported to the New, with the exception that the manorial lords were monks, and the *villeins* savage men. And the pretense at proselyting, with its mongrel mixture of Christianity and superstition, did not make this Transatlantic *villeinage* a whit less severe, or less irksome to endure. Proof of this might be found in a *presidio*, or soldier's barrack—the remains of which were still seen at some distance beyond the *rancheria*. They who had been conquered by the cross, still required the sword to restrain them; which it finally failed in doing.

Several of the huts still standing, and in a tolerable state of repair, offered a shelter to the new settlers; most of whom had taken up abode in them. They were only to serve as temporary residences, until better homes could be built. There was no time for this now. The spring was on, and the cotton-seed must be got into the ground, without thought of anything else.

Colonel Armstrong himself, with his family and house servants, occupied the old mission, which also gave lodgment to Louis Dupre and his belongings. The young planter was now looked upon as a member of the Armstrong family. It only wanted a word from one in holy orders to make him really so; and, as already said, there was such a one, who had come out with the colonists. The marriage ceremony was but deferred until the cotton-seed should be safe under the soil. Then there would be a day of jubilee, to eclipse anything ever seen upon the San Saba; in splendor to exceed the grandest that the Spanish *padres*, celebrated for such exhibitions, had ever got up, or attempted.

But business before pleasure was the adage adopted for the hour; and, after a day or two given to rest, with the arrangement of household affairs, the real work of colonizing commenced. The little painted plows brought from the States, were set to soiling their point, by turning up the fertile clod of the San Saba valley, which had so long lain fallow; while the seed of the famed *gossypium*, still showing some of the staple attached, despite the “ginning” it had received, was scattered far and wide over hundreds and thousands of acres.

Around the ancient mission of San Saba was inaugurated a new life, with scenes of industry, quite as stirring as those presided over by the “monks of old.”

Was it as sure of being prosperous, and more likely to be permanent?

One confining his view to the valley—regarding only the old mission-house, and the vigorous action displayed upon the plain around it, would have answered this question in the affirmative.

But he who looked further off—raising his eyes to the bluff on the opposite side of the river bottom, where the Indians had made halt, would have hesitated before thus prognosticating. In that dusky cohort he might have read, or suspected, a danger threatening the new settlement.

True, the savages were no longer there. After watching the wagons as one after another moved up, and became stationary in front of the mission walls, like vultures deprived of a carrion repast, they had remounted, and ridden away. But not far. Only about five miles from the cliff's edge, where, in a grove of thick timber, they dismounted and made camp.

Two alone were left: evidently to act as *vedettes*. They kept watch night and day, one always remaining awake; and one going every day to communicate with those in camp. Especially during the night hours did they appear on the alert—keeping their eyes constantly bent on the far-off mission-buildings—watching the window-lights that steadily shone, or the torches that flitted to and fro. Certainly watching for something not yet seen. What could it be?

There was no danger of their being themselves seen, either by night or by day. By night they were shrouded in darkness; by day screened by the cedars under which they crouched or stood. Besides, their post of observation was beyond view of the colonists. With the naked eye they could not have been known

as men. It would have been difficult to tell that, even with a glass. They had no fear of being observed.

And not much of any settler straying that way. Though less than five miles from the mission-building, it would take a detour of twenty to reach the place they occupied. A deep, rapid river ran between, fordable only ten miles below, and about as many above. Besides, the bluff was a precipice, running parallel to the stream, and for a like distance unscalable.

The savages in their camp felt safe from being intruded upon by any idle saunterer from the settlement, or even any of the hunters attached to it. The place was beyond the limit, either of promenading, or the chase.

But what was their purpose? To attack the new colony, plunder, and destroy it?

Regarding their numbers, this would seem absurd. They were in all only twenty; while the colonists counted at least fifty fighting men. No common men either; but most of them accustomed to the use of arms, many of them backwoodsmen, some born borderers, and staunch as steel. Against such, twenty Indians—though the picked warriors of the warlike Comanche tribe—would stand no chance in fair, open fight. But they might not mean this; and their intent might be only stealing.

Or they might be but a pioneering party—the vanguard of a stronger force?

In any case, their behavior was suspicious. It told of some design, which, if carried into execution, the old mission of San Saba might still remain a ruin.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MYSTERIOUS PYROTECHNY.

ON the third night after Colonel Armstrong had been installed in his new home, a man might have been seen going out from the mission-building, and making way for some distance from its walls.

He was not seen, perhaps. For it was the hour of midnight, when all were asleep—the colonel himself, his daughters, Dupre, the servants—in short, the whole household.

Moreover, the man went forth stealthily, through the back-door; thence across the second courtyard, and along the passage leading into the garden. Traversing this, he scrambled over a wall separating it from the woods, through which there was a breach.

There was moonlight, and by this he might have been mistaken for a mulatto. Yet, though colored, he was not of this kind. The tawny hue of his skin showed a slight tinge of red, which told that the shading came from Indian, instead of African blood. He was, in short, a *mestizo*—half Spaniard or Mexican, the other half of the aboriginal race of America.

It is a breed not always evil-disposed, and still more rarely ill-featured. So far as looks went, the individual in question might claim to be called handsome. He had a good shock of dark curled hair, framing a countenance by no means common. A face of oval form, regular features, the nose and chin markedly prominent, a pair of coal-black eyes, with a well-defined crescent of eyebrow over each. Between his lips were teeth sound and ivory white, set in regular serrature, showing whiter in contrast with a jet-black mustache that lay along his upper lip.

Taking his features—any of them singly—it could not be caviled at—indeed, might be pronounced of classic type. And yet the *tout ensemble* was not pleasing. Despite its physical beauty there was something in the face that might be termed repulsive—a cast that caused shrinking in the heart of the beholder. Chiefly was it his eyes that seemed to produce this effect; their glance inspiring fear, such as one feels while being gazed at by the orbs of an adder.

It was not always that this glance could be observed. For the *mestizo*, when face to face with his superiors, had the habit of keeping his eyes averted—cast down, as if conscious of having committed crime, or having the design to commit it.

Most people with whom he came in contact were impressed with the idea, that he either had sinned, or intended sinning; and all were chary of giving him confidence. No—not all. There was one exception, and this a notable one: one man who trusted him.

It was the young planter, Louis Dupre. So far trusted, that he had made him his man of confidence—head-servant over all the rest of his household. For it need scarce be told that the real master of the mission mansion, was he who had made it habitable, by filling it with furniture and giving it its staff of servants. Colonel Armstrong was but head through courtesy, and the respect due to a future father-in-law.

Why the creole put such trust in Ferdinand—this was the *mestizo*'s name—no one could understand. The man was not one of those domestics, whose integrity had been tested by long years of service. On the contrary, as was well known, Dupre had never seen him till just before leaving Natchitoches.

While organizing for the expedition, the half-breed had presented himself, and offered to act as guide—professing acquaintance with that

section of Texas whither the colony was to be conducted. He was not exacting as to the nature of the office. He would go in any capacity required, and on these general terms was he engaged. But long before reaching the San Saba, Dupre had promoted him to a higher and more lucrative post—in short, made him "major domo" of his establishment. Now, in the new mansion he was *homme des affaires*, house steward, and *chef* of everything.

Colonel Armstrong could not object. He had not the right. Still less, anybody else. Outsiders only wondered and shook their heads; saying, in whispers, that the thing was strange, and adding, no good can come from it.

Had any of them observed the *mestizo* at that midnight hour, skulking away from his house, had they followed and watched his further movements, they would have indulged in something more than surmises about his fidelity. They would have seen enough to convince them that he was a traitor—supposing them to understand what these movements meant.

No one there was witness to the pyrotechnic display. As already said, there was thick timber between, and no one could have seen it from the house.

For all that, it was not unobserved. The Indian vedettes, stationed on the far-off bluff, saw it. Saw, and furthermore, seemed to comprehend, accepting it as a signal. What but it could have given them their cue, to leap upon the backs of their horses, forsake their post of observation, and ride off to the bivouac of their comrades? Which they did, after taking note that the tenth flash was not followed by another. And what but that could have caused the savages to break up their camp; which they did next day, at an early hour of the afternoon?

Had they gone south, or westward, the movement might not have had much significance. Instead, they turned north, along the line of cliffs, going back upon the same trail they had taken while watching the wagons of Colonel Armstrong. Then, when opposite the place

o'clock of the night; the hour for them to be near the mission-walls.

What was to come after, only their chief could tell—he and his confederate, Fernand.

CHAPTER XLV. IN HOT HASTE.

ABOUT the time that the plumed riders were descending into the valley of the San Saba from the upper plain, a second party of horsemen entered the same valley coming from the Colorado below. They were evidently travelers; though without wagons, or other impedimenta, to retard the course of their journey. They appeared to be traveling in hot haste, mounted upon roadsters that made good time, and had the look of having done so for days. One of them was riding a mule.

There were five in the party. Four being white men. The fifth, who bestrode the hybrid, was of color resembling that of a new saddle.

A dog of deer-hound breed, was trotting behind.



CONTRASTED EMBLEMS.

To say the truth, they were somewhat strange, and to those unacquainted with the pyrotechnic telegraphy of the prairies, quite incomprehensible.

After getting some half mile or so from the mission walls, so that a broad belt of thick woodland was between him and them, he made stop.

Then, crouching down over a flat stone, he poured gunpowder upon it from a horn held in his hand. The quantity was about what would make the charge of an ordinary gun.

This done, he drew forth a box of lucifer matches; scraped one across the surface of the stone, and set the powder ablaze.

It flashed up in broad bright glare, illuminating a large space around.

A second time he repeated the maneuver, just as before; and then a third; and a fourth; and on, till, for the tenth time, the powder flashed.

Then turning away from the spot, he made back to the mission building, and entered it by the way he had gone out, stealthily as before.

where these had crossed the San Saba, they descended into the river bottom, through a ravine at that point splitting the cliff, and continued on to the same crossing.

Just as day was darkening into night, they forded the stream; and setting their horses' heads for the mission, continued on toward it. Not so far as its walls; only to the wood, by whose edge Fernand had flashed the powder.

They did not stay outside the timber; but flitting in among the trees, drew bridle in a glade near by.

Just as they entered this, the old mission clock—that day restored to striking—told the hour of ten.

It was exactly this number of puffs the *mestizo* had made with his powder: and the coincidence was not accidental.

They who saw them had no such thought. They knew it to be a pre-concerted signal; the same that had brought them thither. For the prairie pirates the ten flashes of fire meant ten

It is scarcely necessary to tell who they were. The reader will have surmised, that the white men were Clancy, Woodley, Heywood, and Harkness; while he of the tan-leather complexion was Jupiter.

Soon after crossing the Colorado, they struck the tributary stream; up which they continued, upon the trail that had been taken by Colonel Armstrong's emigrant train. It was easily followed; as no rain had fallen since, and the long grass still lay as when crushed by the wagon wheels. Although riding as rapidly as their jaded horses could go, it was night before they came near the crossing place of the San Saba.

The moon would not be up for an hour or two; and it was so dark, that only one well used to the way could have made further progress along the river's bank, or discovered the ford.

Still, Simeon Woodley could have done this. He had been there before, and was intimately acquainted with the crossing, as also with the trail that led up the valley, on the right side of

the river. This, so lately tracked by Armstrong's emigrant-train, would be all the easier to travel; so easy, that the old hunter said in his forcible phraseology, "he ked grope his way along it ef the sky war kivered wi' a coat o' tar."

He did not make the attempt, notwithstanding Clancy's eager impatience for him to do so,—this due to what Harkness had told him on the way. Besides some information which the recreant jail-keeper had hastily imparted to them on the banks of the Sabine, he had since made other disclosures of a like startling character. While along with Borlase and his band, he had heard hints of a diabolical scheme that not only compromised the safety of Colonel Armstrong and his family, but the whole colony he had taken beyond the Colorado.

It was not of the colony Charles Clancy was now thinking. He could have borne the thought of its getting scattered to the four corners of Texas, if he were but sure of saving Helen Armstrong from a terrible fate which he had reason to fear was impending.

Over the head of his sweetheart, late doubted, now more than ever believed, hung a danger worse than death. He was hurrying forward in the hope of being able to avert it. No wonder at his wishing Woodley to make haste, and the nervous excitement he displayed while urging his companion onward.

It had been the same with him all the way since parting from the Sabine. For weeks they had been following the wagon-trail of Armstrong's expedition; every day, as the signs told them, getting nearer it. But now they had arrived on the banks of the San Saba, and it was still not overtaken.

Clancy's anxiety but increased as they approached the spot where the colonists were to terminate their journey. And above all, as they drew near to the crossing-place of the San Saba. For by what Harkness had heard, this was a place of danger to be especially apprehended.

Had the emigrants succeeded in reaching a haven of safety? This was his thought, his all-absorbing thought; and the question he asked, as for a moment they had pulled up, and sat in their saddles contemplating the wheel-tracks.

It was to Simeon Woodley he addressed it. Heywood, however true his heart, was but a novice on the prairies; Harkness still only a prisoner on parole, and Jupiter a *protege*.

"Keep y'r patience, Charley Clancy," was the backwoodsman's reply. "Take Sime Woodley's word for't, things'll be all right. Ye don't know planter Armstrong as well's I do; though I admit you may have a better unnerstannin' o' the ways o' one as bears the same name. As for the old kumel himself, this coon's campaigned 'long wi' him in the Creek an' Cherokee war, and kin say for sartin he won't go to sleep 'thout keepin' one o' his eyes open—an' that the one as sees clarest. Tharfor', don't you be unner any foolish belief 'bout thar bein' attacked on thar journey—eyther by Injuns or any other sort o' bandits; as b'longs to the Texan purairas. His party war too strong, an' the men composin' it too experienced, to be in any danger o' trouble on the way. Thet air more likely to come arterwards, when they're settled down, an' ain't thinkin' o' any suspishun. Then thar mout be a chance o' circumventin' them. An' then we'll be thar to purvent it. Leastwise, Sime Woodley think so. Tharfor', as we're all tired down, our hosses more'n ourselves, I say let's pass the night hyar, an' gi'e the anymals a rest. In the mornin', by early sun-up, we kin purceed on ag'in. Afore mid-day we shell sight the walls o' the ole mishin'; whar I reckon you'll find the thing you've been so long trackin' arter, all sound an' safe. Afore kumpty I won't say a word about what thet thing air."

This comforting assurance tranquilized Clancy's fears, and checked his impatience. He, with his traveling companions and their horses, had all need of rest. They had been journeying for over two weeks, at a rate of speed known only to pursuers.

In Woodley's opinion, such haste was no longer necessary; and relying upon it, Clancy, the acknowledged leader of the party, gave his consent to make stay for the night, near the spot where they had halted.

He did so reluctantly, and against his will. But his habitual belief in Woodley's superior judgment, silenced all scruples; and after riding in among the trees till they reached the river's bank, and there seeking a proper place, they dismounted and made camp.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A SUSPECTED SERVANT.

IN the former refectory of the mission, which had been converted into a very decent dining-room, Colonel Armstrong was seated, in company with his future son-in-law, and some four or five of their fellow-colonists of the better class. It was on an evening shortly after their taking possession of the place.

The hour was not late; only paulo-post-prandial, if I may be allowed the use of a somewhat pedantic expression.

They were still around the dinner-table, after the ladies had withdrawn—drinking some of the choice claret, and munching the well-preserved

olives, which the young Louisianian planter had brought to Texas along with him. It did not need either the red wine of Bordeaux, or the fruit of Southern France, to render the party hilarious.

The colonel himself, being of Scotch ancestry, had a penchant for whisky-punch, and a tumbler of this beverage was before him. His glass had been already emptied, refilled, and was near to being empty again.

He had pleasant thoughts to elate him. His leaving Mississippi had been a good move. So far things had gone well; and wore a promising aspect. His colonizing scheme, conjointly with the young Creole, looked in every way as if it could not fail to have a successful issue. The star of the Armstrongs, of late years rather waning, was again beginning to look bright. It would, perhaps, ascend higher, and shine more gloriously than ever.

There was but one cloud to darken the horizon of his hopes. This was the sad state in which he saw his elder daughter. He could not help observing it; since the somber melancholy that had late settled over her spirit, was almost constantly visible upon her brow. Indeed, he knew all about it, even to its cause. For she had confessed everything in answer to his parental solicitation. She had, moreover, frankly made known to him the circumstances of her clandestine correspondence with Charles Clancy—even to the contents of that letter intercepted by the assassin. For the people of the new settlement were ignorant of what had actually happened, and still believed Clancy to be dead, and Richard Darke a murderer.

The daughter's frank confession caused the father pain, with some self-reproach. It was his own aristocratic pride—or, perhaps, rather cupidity—that had stood in the way of an open and honorable courtship between her and her lover. Had Clancy's addresses been permitted, the end might have been less disastrous. It could not have been more.

Thus repentantly the father reflected, as, day by day, he saw his child depressed in spirits—as also declining in health. She seemed destined for an early tomb—in truth fast hastening to it.

At first he had hoped that the change to new scenes in Texas might do something to throw oblivion over the past, and bring peace back to her mind, if not her former buoyancy of spirit. He had also a hope that another love might take the place of the lost one.

All in vain; and Colonel Armstrong soon began to see it. It might have been different had the blighted heart been that of his younger daughter, Jessie. With her the Spanish proverb, "*un clavo saca otro clavo*," might have had a meaning.

Not so with Helen. In her heart no second love was likely to have existence. The first was still living, still burning, there; though its object no longer lived to nourish or keep it warm.

Helen Armstrong was of a nature, alas! too rare among her sex—a woman of one love. That won, she would keep it all her life. Lost, she would not, could not, love again. Like an eagle's mate, deprived of her proud lord, she would prefer to live her after-life in lone solitude, or die.

Conscious of this, Colonel Armstrong was at times, himself sad. But by good fortune there was a balance on the other side—many circumstances to compensate and cheer him. The joy of his second child, Jessie; her exuberance of spirits; the hopes that seemed to halo her young life, were flung over the future of all.

And then, there was the excitement attendant on the industries of the hour, the cares of the cotton husbandry, with speculations as to the success of the crop—these, and a hundred other pleasant things kept him from dwelling either often or long on themes that could but distress.

There was nothing to distract him that night, as he sat at the head of the dining-table in the old mission refectory. With the glass of steaming punch before him, and a good cigar between his teeth, he was conversing with his guests, gay as the gayest.

For a time their conversation had been on general subjects. Then it became diverted to a different topic—to a man who had waited upon them at dinner, but who was no longer seen within the room.

He was Dupre's confidential servant, Fernand—who, as we have already said, was house-steward, butler, and *factotum* of affairs generally.

As is usual with such grand dignitaries, he had disappeared shortly after the removal of the table-cloth, leaving a deputy to look to the glasses and decanters. Therefore, there was nothing remarkable about his defection from the dining-room.

Nor would there have been aught observable in it, but for a circumstance communicated by one of the guests during the course of the conversation. A young surgeon, late of Natchitoches, who had cast in his lot with the new colony, was he who made reference to the matter. It was introduced thus:

"Friend Dupre, where did you get that fellow who is acting as your major-domo? I don't remember to have seen him on your Louisiana plantation."

"You mean Fernand? Well, I picked him up in Natchitoches, while we were organizing there. You know I lost my old right-hand man last fall by the yellow fever. It took him off while I was down in New Orleans. Fernand, however, is superior to him in every way. The fellow can keep plantation accounts, wait at table, drive a coach, or help in a hunt. He's a genius of wonderful versatility; and, above all, devoted to his duties."

"What breed is he?" asked another of Colonel Armstrong's guests. "He looks to be a cross between Spaniard and Indian."

"That's just what he is—at least, he has told me so. He says his father was a Spaniard, or rather a Mexican, and his mother an Indian woman of the Seminole tribe. His name is Fernandez; but for convenience I usually drop the final syllable."

"It's a bad sort of cross, that between Spaniard and Seminole, not improved by the Spaniard being of the Mexican sort," remarked the second inquirer.

"I don't like his looks," observed a third.

Then all around the table waited to hear what the first speaker had to say about him. It was clear, from the way he had originated the discourse, that the young medical man either knew or suspected something prejudicial to the major-domo of mixed blood. He continued the conversation by putting a second interrogatory:

"May I ask, M. Dupre, whether you had any character with him?"

"No, indeed," admitted the young planter. "He came to me just before we left Natchitoches, asking for an engagement. He professed to know a good deal about Texas, and offered to act as a guide. As I had engaged guides, I didn't want him for this; and then he said any place would do for him. Seeing him to be a smart sort of fellow, which he certainly has proved, I engaged him to look after my personal baggage. Since, I have found him useful in other ways, and have given him full charge of everything—even to the guarding of my modest money-chest; which, it is true, has got inside of it some fifty thousand dollars, or thereabouts."

"In trusting him so," pursued the surgeon, "do you not think you are acting somewhat imprudently? I hope you will excuse me for making the observation."

"Oh, certainly," was the young planter's frank reply. "But why do you think so, Mr. Wharton? Have you any reason to suspect Fernand's honesty?"

"I have more than one reason."

"Indeed! Let us hear them."

"Well; in the first place, I don't like the look of the man. I never did since the day of starting out. Since I never saw or heard of him before, I could have had no impression to prejudice me against him. Still I was, the first moment I set eyes on him, though I can't tell why. In reading physiognomy anyone may be mistaken; and I shouldn't have allowed myself to be led by that. In this matter, however, a certain circumstance has contributed to the shaping of my judgment; in fact, decided me that your servant is not only dishonest, but that he may be something worse than a thief."

"Worse than a thief!" was the simultaneous echo from all sides of the table, succeeded by a universal demand for explanation.

"Your words have a weighty sound, doctor," was Colonel Armstrong's way of putting it. "We are all anxious to hear what they mean."

"Well," responded the young surgeon, "I'll tell you why I make use of them, and what has caused me to come to such sinister conclusions about Fernand. You can all, of course, draw your own deductions, when I make known to you the circumstance I've spoken of. It is this. Last night at a late hour—indeed, midnight—I took a fancy into my head to have a stroll upon the prairie. Lighting a weed, I started out. I can't say exactly how far I may have gone; but I know that the cigar—a long 'Henry Clay'—was burnt to near the end before I thought of turning back. As I was about doing so I heard a sound, easily made out to be the footsteps of a man, treading the firm prairie turf. I chanced just then to be standing under a pecan-tree that screened me with its shadow."

"I kept my ground without making any noise. Shortly after, I saw the man whose footfall I had heard, and recognized as M. Dupre's head servant. He was coming from the direction of the lower crossing of the river, where, as you all know, there is no settlement of any kind. I might not have thought much of that, had I not noticed, as he passed me, going for the house here, that he didn't walk erect or on the open path, but crouchingly, keeping among the trees that skirted it."

"Throwing away the stump of my cigar, I started after him, treading as stealthily as he."

"Instead of entering by the front, he kept round the garden, all the way to the rear; where suddenly I lost sight of him."

"On getting up to the spot where he had so mysteriously disappeared, I saw that there was a breach in the adobe wall. Through that, of course, he must have passed, and entered the mission-building at the back. Now what are we to make of all this?"

"What do you make of it, Wharton?" asked

Dupre. "Continue on, and give us your deductions."

"To say the truth, I don't know what deductions to draw. I confess myself unable to account for the fellow's movements; which I think all of you will acknowledge were a little odd. As I've said, I didn't from the first like your man of versatile talents; but I'm now more than ever distrustful of him. For all that, I can't think of what he was after last night. Can any of you?"

No one could. The strange behavior of Fernand, as witnessed by Wharton, was a puzzle to all present. At the same time, and under the circumstances, it had a really serious aspect.

Several attempts were made to explain it; all conjectures, and none of them having much appearance of probability.

Had there been any neighboring settlement of civilized men, Dupre's domestic might have been supposed returning from a visit to it; entering stealthily, from being out late, under fear of rebuke by his master. As there were no such neighbors, this theory could not be entertained.

On the other hand, had there been any report of hostile savages seen in proximity to the place, the man's strange conduct might then have been accounted for, upon an hypothesis that would, no doubt, have carried apprehension to those discussing it.

As no savages had been seen or heard of, either on their way to the San Saba or since their arrival; as it was known that the Southern Comanches—the only Indians likely to be there encountered—were then in treaty of peace with the Texan Government, the nocturnal excursion and stealthy movements of the half-blood could not be connected with anything of this kind.

In fine, while a puzzle to the guests around the dining-table, the eccentric conduct of the servant remained for the time an unsolved problem.

Amidst the free quaffing of claret, the gnawing of olives, and the cracking of walnuts—these last of native growth, gathered out of the neglected mission garden—the subject was dropped; the conversation reverting to other and pleasanter themes.

CHAPTER XLVII.

CONTRASTED EMBLEMS.

AFTER leaving the dinner-table, Helen Armstrong and her sister at first retired to the *salu*, or sitting-room. This, though large, was not a very pleasant apartment, and little used by the monks, who in their *post-prandial* hours, preferred sticking to the refectory. As yet but scantily furnished, and not very brilliantly lit up, it looked somewhat dismal. More so, that on this evening the two young ladies were without any company of their own sex. The guests at dinner were but a few gentlemen, who had dropped in uninvited; by the customs of Texan hospitality, not the less welcome for that.

The room was too dismal for Jessie, who soon made this known.

"Come, sister!" said she, "let us go outside. Better than staying in this gloomy cavern. There's a beautiful moonlight, and we may enjoy it. What say you to a stroll through the old garden? A queer place it is, and there may be ghosts there. You're not afraid of them, are you?"

"No," answered Helen, in a tone that told of sad remembrances. "I might have been once; indeed, I was, when a child. But no ghost could scare me now. I feel as if I could dare both the living and the dead."

"Come, then! Let us out to the garden; and if we meet a monk in his hood and cowl—ah, then I shall certainly run in as fast as my feet can carry me. Come along!"

Keeping up this jesting bravado, Jessie led the way out.

Then the two, arm-in-arm, crossed the second courtyard, and kept on through the passage that gave entrance to the garden.

Once inside it, they unhooked their arms, and strolled on through the inclosure.

For a time both remained silent, looking at the objects around. The southern moonlight fell with soft effulgence upon flowers that gave forth a fragrance grateful to the sense of smell; while that of hearing was gratified by the music of the *cenzontle*—the mocking-bird of Mexico. As they entered the garden, one that sat perched upon the top of a China tree, was pouring forth its mimic song, in loud passionate strains.

It ceased on seeing the intruders, though it had nothing to fear from them. The silence that succeeded was broken by Jessie, as the girl continued on down the garden. She said:

"What sybarites the old *padres* must have been! Look at the way they have laid out these grounds! See the seats placed under shade trees. And how pretty that fountain must have looked when it was playing! Whatever may be alleged about their morals, it must be admitted they displayed good taste in landscape-gardening, and they had an eye to good living as well."

"Yes," responded Ellen; "they had certainly a taste for fruit; and a remarkable fondness for it, I should say. They appear to have relished every variety of it."

She said this glancing around at the trees.

They were fruit-trees of most species that send their products to market. Among them oranges, limes, and shaddocks; mangos, guavas, and grenadines; peaches, and quinces; with the representatives of a more northern clime, as pears, apples, apricots, plums, pomegranates, cherries, and nectarines. Here and there a cocoa-palm raised its plumed head, towering far above the tops of the exogenous species; and in warm, shady spots could be seen the broad shining leaves of the plantain and banana. Not all were observable at that hour; but the girls had been in the garden before, and knew they were there.

But few of the above-named fruit-trees are indigenous to Texas. They had been introduced into the mission garden by the men who, "leading a good life," also took care to "live well."

"So much the better for us," gleefully remarked Jessie. "From so many sweet-scented flowers we shall be sure to obtain some savory fruit when the time comes. Ah! won't it be a grand garden when we get these walks graveled, and the fountains restored? Louis has promised this shall be all done as soon as the cotton crop is planted. It will then be a perfect paradise of a place."

"I like it better as it is, in the wild state. There's something in its very desolation that suits my spirit."

"Sister!" returned Jessie, "I'm surprised to hear you speak in that way. Our being in Texas is no reason for our becoming savages; leaving everything uncultivated, and living in a wilderness. No. And I'm determined on making Louis have this old garden and grounds laid out anew; in as good style as they were ever in, perhaps better. Yes; he shall do it when he marries me—if not before."

To this pretty bit of bantering Helen's only answer was another sigh, as deep-heaved as that which had preceded it, and yet more expressive of pain. For, once again she could not help contrasting her own poor position with the proud one now attained by her sister. In reality, Louis Dupre was master of all around, being owner of all; though, to do him justice, he gracefully conceded to his future father-in-law the conduct, as also the leadership, in everything. But there was a master above both, whom the young planter dared not disobey; one who led him in a silken leash, stronger than any chain of iron. This was his affianced, whose golden tresses were dearer to him than all the gold he had transported into Texas.

At thought of all this, Helen Armstrong, once proud, perhaps felt some humiliation. She could not well help it. But in her crushed heart there was no jealousy, nor even envy, at her sister's smiling fortunes. Could Charles Clancy have come to life again, now that she knew he had been true; even to share with her the humblest hut in Texas—all the splendors awarded to her sister, all the grandeurs of earth, would not have given her one emotion more; nor could they, in any way, have excited her thoughts to envy.

She made no reply to her sister's enthusiastic speech; who, giving way to the pleasant fancies of the future, walked on to the bottom of the garden, playfully striking at the flowers as she passed.

Helen followed in silence; and not another word was spoken till they had reached the lower end. Then Jessie stopping, turned round, and the two were face to face.

It was in the full moonlight; and beneath its silvery splendor, the younger saw anguish plainly depicted on the countenance of the elder.

With a sudden fear that her words just spoken might have something to do with it, she was about to speak other words intended to give comfort, when a gesture from Helen kept her silent.

In the spot where they stood, two trees overshadowed the walk, their leaf-laden boughs arched over it. Both were emblematic trees; one symbolizing the most joyous hour of life, the other its saddest. They were an orange and a cypress. The former was in full bloom, as, in southern latitudes, it nearly always is; the latter in leaf, with not a blossom upon its branches.

Helen Armstrong, standing between the two, extended an arm to each, and plucked from the one a sprig, from the other a flower.

Holding the latter in her snow-white fingers, more attenuated than of yore, she dexterously placed it amid Jessie's golden tresses; at the same time setting the other behind a plait of her own raven hair; as she did so, saying:

"That for you, sister; this for me. We are now decked out as befits us—as we shall both soon be—you for the bridal, I for the tomb!"

The sad words, seeming but too prophetic; the wan cheek and somber, shadowy brow, seen under the pale moonlight, all went to the heart of Jessie Armstrong like an arrow with poisoned point. In an instant her own joy was gone—sunk into the sorrow of her sister.

And she herself sunk upon that sister's bosom, with arms extended around her neck, and tears trickling thick and fast over the swan-white shoulders.

It was not the first time that Jessie's heart had overflowed with compassion for her sister. And never more than now did she seem to need it. For as Helen stood in the attitude assumed

by her, holding in one hand the symbol of light and happy life, in the other the emblem of darkness and death, she looked the personification of sorrow. With her splendid cast of features and magnificent form—both superb, grand, commanding—she might have been regarded as its goddess. The ancient sculptors would have given much for such a model, from which to mold the Deity of Despair.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A SUSPICIOUS SKULKER.

FOR a time the two sisters stood with entwined arms, their cheeks in contact, their tears commingling. Jessie's sobs were louder than the sighs she had essayed to change into smiles; her grief greater than that she was trying to assuage.

Helen, perceiving this, rose superior to the occasion; and, as many times before, in turn became the comforter.

Thus often do the scales of happiness and misery vibrate upon the beam.

"Don't sob so, Jess. Like a good girl, don't. You're a little simpleton, and I a big one. Come, let us both dry up our tears. It was wrong of me to say what I've said. Let it be forgotten, then. We may yet both be happy."

"Oh, Helen, if I could but think that!"

"Think it, then. You are happy, and I—I shall try to be. Who knows what time may do—that and Texas?"

She was not sincere in her speech, and knew it. She but counterfeited hope to restore cheerfulness to her sister.

She had well-nigh succeeded, when a third personage appeared upon the scene, causing them to cease their caresses, at the same time turning the thoughts of both into a new channel.

He whose appearance produced this quick change—for it was a man—seemed wholly unconscious of the influence he had exerted; and, indeed, was so.

When first seen, he was coming from the back of the mission building, down the main central walk, which, though of great width, was partially shadowed by trees.

He was not stepping out with the air of one who goes regardless of observation. On the contrary, he came along skulkingly, with catlike tread, keeping in the shadow, every now and then casting a glance over his shoulder, as if in fear of being followed.

It was this that hindered him from seeing those who were observing him. The two girls were close together, with arms still entwined, on one of the side walks; they, too, in shadow.

On first hearing the footsteps they were about to separate. To Jessie they were sounds of joy; for she supposed it might be Dupre coming to join them.

Only for a moment. The tread was too light for a man marching with honest intent, and the steps too shuffling to be those of the young planter.

Soon they saw it was not he, but his majordomo, Fernand.

The first thought of both was one of irritation, at being intruded upon. At such a time, in the midst of sacred emotions, and by a man they instinctively disliked—for Fernand was not a favorite with either.

Thought the second was, that the majordomo was seeking them, sent with some message from the house, which would of course be excuse sufficient.

Concluding his errand to be this, they waited to receive him, both observing silence.

When nearly opposite the spot where they stood, they saw that he was moving stealthily; and noticed other signs which on his part betrayed apprehension.

"What can it mean?" whispered Jessie into her sister's ear; who replied by placing a finger on her lips, to admonish silence.

They remained motionless as before, and without further exchange of speech, till the half-blood, still skulking on, came out on the bottom walk.

Where the two paths met there was an open space, on which the moonbeams fell; and just opposite, in the *adobe* wall, a place broken down—the mud brick, that had crumbled into clods, forming a *talus* on each side, with a slope that made it easy to pass over.

For a moment, Fernand halted in front of it. Then scrambling up the slope, he remained in crouching attitude in the breach—just long enough to give a last glance up the garden.

Apparently satisfied that he was neither followed nor observed, he dropped down the opposite side, where he was lost to the view of the sisters; who both stood wondering—Jessie sensibly trembling.

"What on earth is that creature after?" asked Helen, whose speech came first.

"What, indeed?" echoed Jessie.

"A question you, Jessie, should be better able to answer than I. He is the trusted servant of M. Dupre; and surely your Louis must have told you all about him?"

"Not a word has he. He knows that I don't like the man, and never did from the first. I've intimated as much to my Louis—as you call him—more than once."

"That ought to have got the fellow his dis-

charge. Dupre will surely not keep him, when he knows it's disagreeable to you?"

"Well, perhaps he would not if I were to put it in that way. I haven't done so as yet. I only hinted that, for a confidential servant, Fernand wasn't altogether to my liking; especially to be made so much of as Louis seems to make of him. You know, dear Helen, that my future lord and master is of a very generous and trusting nature; far too much, I fear, for some of the people now around him. Louis has been brought up like Creoles, without thought for the morrow; perhaps a little too fond of pleasure, though not without a good stock of ambition. A sprinkling of Yankee cuteness wouldn't do him any harm. As for this Fernand, he has insinuated himself into Louis' confidence in some way that appears quite mysterious. As you know, it puzzles our father; though he says nothing to Louis about it. So far he has been satisfied, because the man has proved very capable, and useful to them in their affairs. It appears he knows all about this part of the country, having been in it before. He is very subservient both to father and Louis; which father don't like, I know. For my part I'm mystified about that fellow. Above all, I can't make out what he's after now."

Such was the conclusion of Jessie's somewhat prolonged response to her sister's searching interrogatory.

"I confess to a like quandary," rejoined Helen. "His conduct, all along, but more especially M. Dupre's behavior to him, quite perplexes me; as I think it does most of our people. Mr. Wharton, who is a sensible sort of person in his way, does not hesitate to say that Louis acts very imprudently in trusting him. That, however, is all mere suspicion, and might arise from looking in Fernand's face. I don't think anyone could scrutinize his countenance without coming to the conclusion that it belongs to a villain—one capable of almost any crime. There is something so animal-like about his eyes—that Spanish expression suggesting the stiletto, with a readiness to make use of it. Like yourself, I had a bad opinion of him from the first, judging him only by his looks. Now, if I mistake not, we have proof of guilt in his actions, or are soon likely to have. From the way he went past he is evidently on some errand not honest. Can you not give some guess as to what it is?"

"No! Not the slightest."

"Can it be theft, think you? Is there anything he could be carrying away from the house, with the intention of secreting it outside? Some of your Louis's gold for instance, or the pretty jewels he has given you?"

"My jewels! No; they are safe in their case; locked up in my room, too, of which I've here got the key. As for Louis' gold, he hasn't much of that, as I know most of the money he possesses—more than fifty thousand dollars, I believe—is in silver. I wondered at his bringing it out here in that heavy shape, for it made a whole wagon-load of itself. He told me the reason, however. It appears that, among Indians and men trading upon this far frontier, gold is not held in such esteem as silver is."

"It can scarcely be silver Fernand is taking out—if it be theft he's engaged in. He would look more loaded, and could not have leaped so lightly over that wall. He did not appear to be carrying anything, did he?"

"I saw nothing. And sure, as you say, he was skipping along like a grasshopper."

"Rather say gliding like a snake. I never saw a man whose movements more resembled the devil in serpent shape—except one."

The thought of that one, who was Richard Darke, caused Helen Armstrong to suspend speech; at the same time evoking a sigh from her bosom, given to the memory of another one—Charles Clancy.

"Shall we go back into the house?" asked Jessie.

"For what purpose?"

"To tell Louis of what we've seen; to warn him about Fernand."

"If we did the warning would be unheeded. I fear Monsieur Dupre will remain unconvinced of any intended treachery of his trusted servant—until something unpleasant occurs. After all, we have as yet only suspicions. I propose that we stay here a little longer, and see what comes of it. No doubt, he will soon return from his stealthy promenade; and is sure to enter again this way. By remaining, and watching him, we may find out what he's scheming after. Shall we wait for him, then? You're not afraid, Jessie?"

"I am a little, I confess. Do you know, Helen, this Fernand gives me the same sort of feeling I had when I used to meet that big fellow in the streets of Natchitoches. At times he glares at me just in the same way. And yet the two are so different."

"Well, since no harm came of your Natchitoches bogie, it's to be hoped there won't come any from this one. If you have any fear to remain, let us go in. Only my curiosity is greatly stirred by what we've just seen, and I'd like to know the end of it. If we don't discover anything, it can do us no harm. What say you? Shall we go, or stay?"

"I'm not afraid now. You make me brave, sister. Beside, we may find out something Louis ought to know."

"Then," said Helen, "let us stay."

CHAPTER XLIX.

WAITING THE WORD.

WHILE Colonel Armstrong and his fellow-colonists were enjoying themselves in the refectory of the ancient mission, a band of men, nearly three times their number, might have been seen at less than an English mile's distance from the place, though for a time not moving any nearer to it.

They were halted in a circular spot of glade-ground, one-half its circumference inclosed by a cliff, the other shut in by a wood of heavy timber, whose thick selvedge appeared almost as impassable as the facade of rugged rock opposite to it.

They were all horsemen, though not at the moment in their saddles. They were standing or moving over the open ground of the glade, most of them collected in a group near its center; while their animals were tied here and there to the trees. By the bridle-reins were these attached, and they still carried their saddles, with such caparison as belonged to them; showing that their riders had no intention to encamp on that spot, though it was night and the hour a late one. They were evidently using it but as a temporary stopping-place. Moreover, they appeared impatient to part from it, and were but waiting the word from one having authority to give it.

Such a one there was; a man of large stature, who stood in the midst of the central group, nearly the head higher than any of those around him. He, too, appeared to be waiting for some one—as if a scout sent out to reconnoiter.

Clearly was it something of this kind that kept them at rest. For, every now and then the eyes of the colossal chief, as also of the others, were directed toward the timber's edge, as if expecting some one to appear.

Before reaching the place where they now were, they had ridden a long way—almost the distance of a day's journey. They had started from a camp on the opposite side of the San Saba; to which they had retired after watching Colonel Armstrong's emigrant train up the valley, and witnessing its safe arrival at the ancient mission. For it was the same band of prairie pirates that was now *en bivouac* within less than half a mile of its walls.

As already stated, they had returned from this camp, and descended into the San Saba bottom, from the bluffs beyond. They had passed across the valley, and over the river at the same place where Colonel Armstrong's wagon-train went over—the only ford available without ferry-boats for nigh twenty miles. All this on the day after Fernand had given his exhibition of fireworks, apparently without spectators.

Night was darkling down as they made crossing of the stream. Once over they kept on up the other side, taking the road toward the mission. But before reaching it, they struck into a thick wood, and riding silently and in single file, entered a glade—the same in which they were now tarrying.

All these movements have been already made known. It remains to reveal their motive—the purpose of their silent, mysterious march, and their halt not intended for a continued encampment.

As yet this could be but imperfectly surmised. For no one would suppose that they intended attacking Colonel Armstrong's colony. The plumed warriors in all counted only twenty. All, it is true, stalwart and formidable-looking fellows—perhaps the picked braves of a tribe.

Still, there could be no chance for them in a collision with the colonists, who could muster of fighting men at least thrice their number. Were they preparing a surprise, and trusting to a panic! Who could tell this? No one, who was not of their party.

And many of themselves might not have been able to answer the question. For despite their savage garb, and bandit bearing, an air of discipline appeared to pervade their ranks, while the giant acting as their chief seemed to exact from them a life or death obedience.

Perhaps, as yet, he alone knew the exact nature of the *maraud* they were about to make. For certainly was it something of this kind. No one acquainted with their movements for several days past, could have come to any other conclusion.

And now, seeing them within the glade, observing their excited air—though at rest, looking like panthers preparing to spring upon prey—no one, a witness to this, but would have foretold trouble to the new colony, and that the conviviality of Colonel Armstrong and his guests was in danger of being rudely interrupted.

The forecast would have been still more easy to make, at sight of a man who soon after arrived in their midst, coming from the direction of the mission-house. He came skulking under the shadow of the trees; but as he entered the open ground of the glade, and the moonlight fell upon his face, it could be recognized as that of Dupre's doubted servant, Fernand.

In less than twenty minutes after passing through the breach in the broken wall, the half-Mexican, half-Indian made appearance among those who seemed of purer Indian blood.

On his arrival they crowded eagerly around him, as if expecting to receive some intelligence of interest to all.

This he imparted, but only in *sotto voce*, to their chief; with whom for some time he stood apart, conversing.

Whatever the nature of the communication, it caused the latter to issue an order for instant departure from the place.

In less than five minutes after, they were all on horseback and in motion—moving toward the mission walls.

Fernand alone kept on foot, heading the cavalcade, and gliding in advance of it with the agility of a squirrel—evidently acting as its guide.

One who could have witnessed the approach of that plumed cohort—who could have seen their savage faces, grim and ghostlike under the horrid heraldry of paint—who had been told where they were going, and with what intent—would have sent up to Heaven a fervent prayer for the safety of Colonel Armstrong and his fellow-colonists.

If still further informed about the men who composed the band of freebooters, the prayer would have ended with the reflection:

"Heaven help Colonel Armstrong's daughters! If God does not guard, a fearful fate is in store for them—a destiny worse than death!"

CHAPTER L.

BORNE OFF.

It is time to return to the girls in the garden. Having resolved to await the coming back of Fernand, and watch his further movements, the sisters now bethought them of seeking a safer post of observation; one where there would be less danger of being themselves seen.

It was to Helen the idea occurred.

"On his return," she said, "he might stray this way, and not go up by the center walk. We had better conceal ourselves more effectually. I wonder he didn't see us while passing out. No doubt he would have done so, but for his looking so anxiously behind and going at such a rapid rate. Coming back he may not be so much hurried. If he should discover us, there will be an end to our chances of getting satisfied about him. Where's the best place for us to play spy?"

The two looked in different directions, in search of a spot appropriate.

There could be no difficulty in finding such. The shrubbery, long unpruned, grew luxuriantly everywhere, screening the facade of the wall along its whole length.

Near by was an arbor of evergreens, thickly overgrown with orchids, bignonias, and other trailing plants.

They knew of this shady retreat; had been in it before during daylight. Now, although the moon was shining brightly down upon the trees, its interior, arched over by the thick foliage was in shadow—dark as a cavern. Once inside it, eye could not see them from without—no matter how near.

"The very place," whispered Helen; and they started toward it.

To reach the arbor they had to cross the main walk, and pass the place where the wall had been breached by some rude intruders—perhaps these savages who had, long ago, made the mission desolate.

The crumbling *adobes* scattered over the path rendered it necessary for the young ladies to step slowly and with care. They did so, going hand in hand for mutual support.

They were nearly opposite the gap, where the ground was open, unshaded by either trees or shrubbery. There, exposed, their white dresses floating lightly around them as they glided silently along, they might have been taken for sylphs, or wood-nymphs, moving under the moonlight.

To complete the silvan picture, it would seem necessary there should be wood-demons as well.

And such in reality there were, not far off. Demons, or something closely resembling them. No satyrs could have shown in more grotesque guise than the forms at that moment moving up to the wall on the opposite side.

Gliding on, the sylph-like sisters arrived before the gap. Some instinct, perhaps curiosity, tempted them to take a look at the shadowy forest outside. And there, as if under the spell of an unaccountable fascination, they stood for a time gazing into its dark, mysterious depths.

They saw nothing save the coruscation of the fire-flies. Nor did they hear anything but the usual voices of the Southern night, to which both had been from infancy accustomed. There might have been other sounds. If so, they were by these obscured, and, to the sisters, inaudible.

Their pause, although of scarcely sixty seconds duration, was all of this too long. Had they kept on into the arbor, they might have remained unseen, and, perhaps, escaped the catastrophe in store for them.

They were about moving on again, when they heard footsteps. Irregular and scrambling, as if one making way over the scattered *adobes*

Simultaneously a man was seen coming through the gap in the wall.

It was Fernand.

No use, now, to attempt either concealment or retreat.

He saw them—could not help it.

Nor did he show any desire to retreat, or himself shun observation. On the contrary, he sprang down from the rampart and presented himself rudely before them. Rudely, indeed! With the moon shining full in his face, they read upon it an expression worse than rudeness. The subservience habitual to the inferior was no longer there. In its place a bold, bullying glance, as of one who feels himself master and designs playing tyrant. His eyes were flashing with a livid light, while between his lips, set in a smile, his white teeth were gleaming like a tiger's.

It was an expression of sardonic triumph terrible to behold.

He did not say a word. He had not time. For Helen Armstrong spoke at once. The proud girl, indignant at his impudent intrusion, and too fearless to be frayed, commenced chiding him in severe tone.

Her words were strong and brave. If alone, the scoundrel might have quailed under the castigation. But he did not permit it to continue.

Instead, he cried out, interrupting her, "Come on there! Make haste with the mufflers! Quick, or—"

He himself was not permitted to finish his speech, or, if so, the last words were unheard. In its midst came a rushing, rumbling noise, and the gap in the garden wall closed up suddenly, as if by enchantment. It was a dark mass that filled it; at first seeming compact, but soon scattering into distinct forms.

They were men; though, to the eyes of the alarmed sisters, they looked more like fiends. No wonder at this, since on the American frontier the typical aspect of the devil is that of a plumed and painted Indian. And those seen upon the wall, now making way through it, were plumed and painted Indians!

The startled sisters had but time to give one wild cry—a shriek. Before either could utter a second, brawny arms had embraced them; serapes were thrown over their heads; they felt themselves rudely raised from the earth, and borne rapidly away!

CHAPTER LI.

LOCKED IN.

COLONEL ARMSTRONG and his guests were still seated around the dinner table. As already said, they had ceased to talk of Dupre's suspected servant; and their conversation was now about sugar—discussing the point of whether the saccharine reed could be raised in the San Saba valley.

They all knew it could be grown there. The question was, whether it would pay.

As on almost every other speculative subject, there was difference of opinion; some holding that it would answer well; others that it would not be worth cultivating. A bulky article, difficult of transport, and too far from a shipping port.

While the discussion was going on, a new guest entered the room: who, without waiting for an invitation to speak, said a few words that at once put an end to the conversation about sugar.

The words were:

"Gentlemen! there are Indians about!"

He who made the announcement was one of Colonel Armstrong's fellow-colonists; though not one who would have been invited to his private table, or even to a glass of wine after dinner. He was of the class of common settlers, with the air of a rough backwoodsman, and wearing the costume of a professional hunter—buckskin from head to heel. In point of fact, he was one—Hawkins by name—who had come out along with the colonists, to act as game purveyor.

He had stepped into the room unannounced, confident that the report he carried would hold him free from being considered an intruder.

And it did. On the moment of his pronouncing the word "Indians," all around the table started to their feet, and stood waiting, breathlessly expectant of what he had further to communicate.

Colonel Armstrong alone spoke; the old soldier showing the presence of mind befitting an occasion of alarm.

"Indians about! What reasons have you for thinking so, Hawkins?"

"The best of reasons, colonel. I've seen 'em myself."

"Seen them yourself? Where?"

"Well, Cris Tucker and I started out this mornin' at an early hour, intendin' to make a good day's hunt of it. We took down the river bottom to the crossing-place. We then went over to the further bank, because we'd noticed plenty of deer on that side, the day we all came up. We found the animals again, and shot three does and a buck. In followin' them we got close in to the bluffs, where we saw an easy path through a sort of gully that sloped up to a

high plain as lies beyond. Cris believed we might find buffalo upon it; and so we strung our venison on a tree and kept on up the gully.

"When we reached the plain above, we struck out over it, and went on about six or seven mile, but saw no buffalo nor any other game. What we did see was something to give us a start. While we were restin' by the side of a clump o' black-jack timber, we got sight of a party of men, all mounted. They looked at first as if they were comin' straight toward the place where we'd halted. We were both pretty bad scared; but just then they turned off a little, and passed us—not very near, but near enough for us to see that they were Indians. We could see their feathers and painted faces plain enough as the sun shined on them. As we didn't want to get any closer, we kept under cover, and let them pass on.

"When they were clean out o' sight we started for home, keeping a sharp look-out not to come across them again.

"While ridin' back over the upper plain we didn't see anything more of them, not till we got to the crossing of the river below. But there, in the mud, where the bank slopes down to the water's edge, were the tracks of at least twenty horses, fresh made. It was darkish twilight; still, we were able to tell that. We could tell, too, they were unshod animals, and could be no other than them ridden by Indians. For certain they were the same party as passed us on the upper plain.

"After gettin' to this side the stream, we again looked for the tracks. There were they, sure enough, leadin' up out of the river bed on to the bank. Then they turned in this direction, and we traced 'em all along the river edge up the bottom, till we couldn't make them out any longer, as it had got darker. We lost them about a mile below the mission here. Where the savages went afterward, or where they are now, 'tarn't possible for me to tell. All I've got to say is, what I've sayed already: *there are Indians about.*"

The information thus imparted produced a startling effect on the minds of the assembled planters; all to a man, becoming suddenly apprehensive of danger. The more so, from its being their first alarm of the kind. While traveling through Eastern Texas, where the settlements are thick and of somewhat old standing, Indians had not even been talked of. There was no chance of seeing any there. Only after drawing nigh to the Colorado were Indians likely to be encountered, though it did not necessarily follow that the encounter should be hostile. On the contrary, it ought to be friendly; since a treaty of peace had for some time been existing between the Comanches and Texans.

For all this, Colonel Armstrong, being an old Indian-fighter, and thoroughly acquainted with the character of the red-men, both in war and in peace, had not relied altogether on their pacific promises. He knew that such contracts only bind the savage so long as convenient to him, to be broken whenever they become irksome. Moreover, a rumor had reached the emigrants, that, although the great Comanche nation was itself keeping the treaty, there were several small bands of independent tribes—Lipians and Seminoles—accustomed to make intermittent "marauds" upon the frontier settlements, chiefly for stealing horses, or anything else that chanced to fall in their way.

For this reason, after entering the territory where such marauders might possibly be encountered, the old campaigner had conducted his train as if passing through an enemy's country. The wagons had been regularly *corraled*, and night guards kept—both camp sentinels and outlying pickets.

These rules had been observed up to the moment of arrival at their destination. Then, as the people got settled down in their respective domiciles, and nothing had been hitherto heard of Indians in that district of country, the discipline had been relaxed—in fact, almost abandoned. The colonists, in all numbering over fifty men, with the usual proportion of women and children—to say nothing of the two or three hundred negro slaves—deemed themselves strong enough to repel any ordinary assault from savages. They now felt themselves at home; and with the confidence thus inspired, they had ceased to think about being molested either by redskins or any other enemies.

It was for this reason, as we have said, that the apparently eccentric movements of Dupre's half-breed servant, observed by the young surgeon, had failed to make more than a passing impression on those seated around the dining-table.

Now, after the communication made by Hawkins, it presented a more serious aspect—was, in truth, alarmingly suspicious. Everyone in the room leaped to the conclusion, that the half-blood inside the house was in secret correspondence with full-blooded Indians outside, and that some scheme was on foot, whether of pilfering or plunder could not be determined.

The thought of either was sufficient to excite Colonel Armstrong's guests, and they all rose to their feet, ready to take action.

The old soldier was the first to direct it, saying:

"Summon your half-breed in, Dupre. Let us see what the fellow has to say for himself."

"Tell Fernand to come here!" commanded the young planter, the command being given to one of the negro boys who waited on the table. "Tell him to come instantly!"

The negro hastened off to execute the order, and was several minutes before making reappearance.

During the interval, they continued to discuss the circumstances that had so suddenly turned up; questioning Hawkins, and receiving from him some further details of what he and his comrade had seen.

Whatever new light was thus thrown upon the subject, only excited them the more, increasing their apprehensions.

These were still further intensified, when the darkey returned into the dining-room with the announcement that, "Fernand wasn't to be found!"

"What do you mean, boy?" thundered Dupre, in a voice that well-nigh frightened the negro out of his wits. "Is he not within the house?"

"Dat's jess what he ain't, Mass' Looey. De 'Panish Indyan ain't no whar inside de buildin'. We hab s'arch' all oba de place. De people call out his name, Fernan', in de store-rooms, an' in de coatyard, an' in de cattle 'closure—ebbery wha dey t'ink of. Dey shout loud nuf for him to hyeer, ef he war anywha 'bout. He gib no answer. Sartin shoo he no inside dis 'tablishment."

The young Creole appeared dismayed. So also the others, in greater or less degree, according to the light in which each viewed the matter.

For now on the minds of all was an impression that there was danger at the bottom of Fernand's doings—serious danger—how near they knew not.

At any other time his absence would have been a circumstance not worth noting. It might have been supposed that he was on a visit to some of the huts appropriated to the humbler families of the colonist fraternity. Or the attraction might be a mulatto "wench," of whom there were several, belonging to Dupre's extensive slave-gang, some of them far from ill-favored.

The half-blood was himself rather a handsome fellow, as also given to gayety. This would have accounted for his temporary absence from the house and his duties as its head servant, but for what the young surgeon had seen, and, above all, the report just brought in by the hunter Hawkins. The last had impressed every one within the room, forcing them to the conclusion that Fernand was a traitor.

The question was asked: how, coming direct from the States, he could have an understanding with the savages of Western Texas?

In answer to this question, Colonel Armstrong and Dupre now recalled to memory what had been made known to them by the man himself—that he had visited Texas before, and had been all over it. While soliciting service, he had professed this much about Texan travel, with a view of supporting his claim to capacity. Therefore, his being in correspondence with Comanches, or any other Texan Indians, need be no mystery, should it turn out that he was so. It would be but the renewal of a former acquaintance. Though in blood he was but half Indian, in physical appearance and other characteristics he was quite three-quarters aboriginal. Stripped of civilized garb, and clad in true redskin costume, he would have looked the savage to perfection. So they all said as they sat talking of him.

They were not going to remain long seated. His unaccountable absence from the premises had roused them to a pitch of excitement that called for immediate action.

Still, they had sufficient coolness left, to perceive the necessity of deliberation before taking any steps. They saw the mistake they had committed in relaxing their watchfulness. Their reliance upon the Texan treaty—with the fact of no Indians having been seen or heard of on the way—had lulled them into a security which, if false, might cost them very dear.

All within the room remembered, that at that hour no sentinels were set, not even the ordinary horse-guard. If Indians intended attack, it might be made at any moment.

Reflecting thus, they resolved on at once taking precautionary measures. They would collect a patrol, and throw out sentries around both the mission buildings, as well as the outlying collection of huts, in which most of the colonists were housed.

They only remained at the table to take another drink, and then "To arms!"

They had risen to their feet, and stood facing it—some to quaff off their already half-emptied glasses, others to refill them—when the door of the dining-room was again thrown open; this time with a hurried violence that caused all to start as if a bombshell had rolled into the room.

Turning toward it, they saw the negro boy again entering—the same who had reported the absence of Fernand. Fear was depicted in his face, and wild terror gleaming in his eyes; the latter awry in their sockets, showing only the whites!

Their own alarm was not much less than his.

on hearing what he had to say. His words were:

"Oh, Mass' Armstrong! Oh, Mass' Looey! De place am full ob Indyan sabbages! Dey've come up de garden, troo back passage. Dar outside, in de coatyrd, more'n a thousan' ob um. Dey're a-murderin' ebberrybody!"

At the dread tidings, glasses dropped from the hands that held them; most of them flung down in fury.

They all, as one man, made for the door—still standing open as the darkey in his scare had left it.

It was not their intention to shut it, but to rush outside for the protection of those dear.

Before they could reach it, they had confirmation of the negro's words—too full. They saw faces hideous with red paint; heads horrid with coal-black shaggy hair, and plumes bristling above them.

But a glimpse had they of these, dimly visible in the obscurity outside. Though short, it was terrible; like a transitory tableau in some fearful dream, or a glance into hell itself.

Conducted by one who well knew the way, they had no difficulty in finding it. Under his guidance they passed through the cattle corral, and on into the *patio*. Until entering the inner court they were not observed. Then the negro lad, still searching for Fernand, saw them, and ran off for the refectory.

He was too late in giving the alarm. Half a dozen of the foremost, following him, were at the dining-room door almost as soon as he, while others proceeded to the front entrance, and closed the great gate, as if to prevent any one from escaping outward.

In the courtyard then commenced a scene, horrible to behold. The domestics frightened, and running to and fro, were struck down with tomahawks, impaled upon spears, or hacked and stabbed with long-bladed bowie-knives. At least half a score of these unhappy creatures fell before the indiscriminate slaughter. Indiscriminate as to age or sex; for men, women, and children, were among the victims.

At first sight of the savages they had raised their voices in loud alarm, uttering shrieks and

Inspired by hatred to the pale-face, or thought of retaliatory vengeance, they would have acted differently. They carried guns, pistols, and spears, and could easily have shot, or thrust, every man inside the room. They could have done this through the door, or, more easily, through the outside windows.

That they refrained, was from no motives of humanity. They had massacred the colored domestics to stifle their cries. Their white masters were left unmolested, because the shots might be heard by other white men—their fellow-colonists at the rancheria, who would come to their rescue. The slaughter and its cessation were alike measures of precaution.

While it was still going on, a party of the savages was otherwise occupied. This was composed of five or six picked men, the gigantic chief conspicuous in their midst.

It was they who had first entered the courtyard, and closed the dining-room door. Having placed sentries there, they continued on to another door—that of a room that also opened into the corridor, in one of its corners. It was the



BORNE OFF.—PAGE 39.

The sight brought them to a stand; though only for an instant. Then they rushed on toward the doorway, intending to go out, regardless of what awaited them.

They were not permitted to get outside. Before they had reached it, the door was dashed to, striking the lintels with a loud clash.

This sound was quickly followed by another, that of a key turning in the wards, and shooting a heavy bolt into its keeper.

They were locked in!

CHAPTER LII.

MASSACRED WITHOUT MERCY.

It need not be told who were the Indians that had shewn their faces at the dining-room door; afterward shutting and locking it. They were those whom Dupre's traitorous servant had guided through the gap in the garden wall.

After making seizure of the girls, they had hastened on for the house, the half-blood still at their head.

shouts for succor; mingled with a piteous appealing for mercy.

Their cries were disregarded. One after the other, they fell before their fiendish assailants, like saplings cut down by the *machete*. It was a scene of red carnage, resembling a *saturnalia* of demons—demons doing murder!

It was short as satanic. In less than ten minutes after its commencement it was all over. The victims had succumbed, and their bleeding bodies lay along the pavement. Only a few had escaped; those who preserved sufficient presence of mind to seek safety by rushing inside rooms, and barricading the doors behind them.

Ere the ten minutes' time was up, the sanguinary scuffle had ended, and silence was restored. Then ensued a scene altogether different, proclaiming the purpose of those making the attack. That it was robbery, and not red murder, was evident from the way they now went to work. Instead of continuing their onslaught against those shut up within the dining-room, they only left two or three to stand guard by its door.

chamber which the young planter, Dupre, had chosen as his sleeping room; where he also kept the account-books belonging to this grand slave establishment—along with his treasure. In it were deposited the kegs containing his cash, fifty thousand dollars, most of it in silver.

At the head of this party was the traitor, Fernand. Something in his hand could be seen glancing under the light of the moon. It was a key.

Soon it was inserted into its lock. The door flew open, and the half-blood entered, closely followed by the others. All went in, with an eagerness telling that they knew of the shining treasure inside.

After a short while they came out again, each bearing a barrel, of small size, but weight almost sufficient to test his strength.

Laying these down, they re-entered the room, and soon returned, similarly loaded.

And again they went and came out, carrying other barrels until nearly a score of them were exposed upon the pavement.

By this, the red carnage had come to an end; and those engaged in it, were left free to join the party occupied with the removal of the specie. At the same time the sentries left to guard the two doors were called away, and the whole band became clustered round about the barrels of silver, like vultures around a carcass.

Some words were spoken in undertone. Then each, laying hold of a keg—there was one each for nearly all—lifted it from the ground, and carried it off out of the courtyard.

Silently, and in single file, they passed across the cattle corral, on into the garden, down the central walk, and out through the gap by which they had entered.

Near by stood their horses, tied to trees, and well concealed within shadow. They were still under saddle, with the bridles on.

It took but little time to "unhitch" them from the twigs to which they were attached. Each man did this for his own.

Then they mounted, after balancing the ponderous barrels upon their saddle-bows, and there making them fast with their trail-ropes.

When all were on horseback, they moved silently but rapidly away; the half-blood going along with them.

He, too, had now a horse, the best in the troop—stolen from the stables of that master he had so basely betrayed and pitilessly plundered.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SCENE INSIDE.

WHILE in the courtyard of the ancient mission, red ruthless murder was making havoc with the colored domestics, with only a wall between them and their masters; while robbery wholesale was going on at the same time; inside the refectory was a scene, if not so cruelly savage, almost as exciting.

No pen could depict the feeling that came over Colonel Armstrong and his fellow-colonists when the door of the dining-room was closed, and they saw themselves shut in. Not only shut in, but positively imprisoned; hopelessly, helplessly engaged! A glance around the room convinced them of this; which given, a stark, shuddering horror thrilled through their hearts.

There was but one way of egress: the doorway leading into the corridor that skirted the patio, or central court of the quadrangle. Its door resembled that of a jail, massive, made of thick oak planks, further strengthened by transverse cleets and clasps of iron. An enormous old-fashioned lock, with a strong bolt, gave it security when shut—as it now was.

Of windows there were two, facing toward the outside of the building; but both small, as if only intended to give light to a cloister. They were high above the level of the floor; and further protected, against egress or ingress, by vertical iron bars, so stout as to defy the file of either jail-breaker or burglar. The *padres*, while dining, did not much affect the light of the sun. More pleasing to them to see their refectory table garnished with grand wax candles abstracted from the ceremonials of the church; more agreeable to think that, while quaffing and laughing, no eye of outsider should see, nor ear hear them.

On the door being closed, they who were inside did not at first fully realize the desperateness of their situation.

It was only after scanning the room around, and perceiving the impossibility of getting out, that this became clear.

Then the scene of confusion, already wild, was followed by a pause, in which intense emotions and heartfelt passions had fullest play.

As if from one throat pealed a simultaneous shout. It was a cry of rage, intoned with an accent of distress, as they thought of the dear ones outside: those at no great distance, but separated from them, and as truly beyond reach of their protection, as if twenty miles lay between!

Colonel Armstrong thought of his daughters, Dupre of his fiancée, the others of wives and children. All more or less had their share in the anguish of the hour.

For some moments they stood as if paralyzed, gazing in one another's faces in dumb despair.

Then, anger again roused them to energy, though they knew not how to direct it.

The hunter Hawkins, a man of herculean strength, flung himself against the door and battered it with his shoulder-blade, in hope of leaving it from its hinges.

Vain hope! It resisted the attempt, several times repeated.

Others joined with him; and a number of them, uniting their strength, endeavored to dash it open.

Their efforts were idle. It hinged to the inner side, and could not be stirred—unless along with its posts and lintels. These were as firm as the stone wall in which they were set, and defied all attempts to dislodge them. The massive wood-work, strengthened with iron cleets, would have stood firm against the shock of a battering-ram. Easier for them to have crevassed the wall, and through it obtained egress.

Finding the door could not be forced, they gave over the effort in despair.

The windows were next attempted; both

simultaneously, but with like result. In planning their mission-building the monks had taken care that it should be made safe against assault from the outside. The window bars were as thick as a jail grating; and, though time and rust had somewhat weakened them, they were yet strong enough to sustain the shock of a man's shoulder, or any pull from the stoutest pair of arms.

For some minutes the imprisoned men kept shaking and tugging at them; some irresolutely rushing across the room from door to windows, and back again; others confusedly groping around the walls in search of any implement that might help in gaining them an exit.

None could be found. There was nothing in the refectory, except a dining-table and a set of chairs, all useless for the purpose required.

They searched, groping in darkness. For, on finding themselves shut in, they had blown out the candles. They had done it as a precautionary measure: expecting every moment to be shot at from the outside.

They had no fire-arms themselves—neither guns, pistols; no arms of any kind. Even the dinner knives had been removed, along with the table-cloth; and the only weapons they could make available were the bottles and decanters!

More than all did they regret being without their guns and pistols. Not that with either they could have done aught to injure the enemy that had so cunningly put them *hors de combat*. But shots fired—even a single one—might have been heard at the *rancheria*, giving warning of the attack, and brought their fellow-colonists to the rescue.

After failing in their attempts to force a way out, they remained for a time at rest, listening acutely.

No report of gun, or other fire-arm, reached them. Instead they heard shouts, which they could distinguish as the cries of the household servants—all negroes, mulattoes, or quadroons. No voice of white man mingling in the *melee*!

And there was no savage yell; such as is usually raised by Indians, and kept up by them, while engaged in action either warlike or predatory.

Alone could be heard the voices of the domestics; these in a confused *fracas* that spoke of wildest fear.

At intervals came a cry that had in it the accent of piteous appealing.

Then groaning and moaning, heard only for a short while, and as if suddenly and forcibly silenced!

After that all sounds ceased; and outside was silence like, too like, the silence of death!

Inside they, too, were silent. Their wild excitement had subsided. After the first burst, their throes of angry passion had given place to feelings that bordered on despair. For apprehension remained with all its keen agony.

If the reaction produced despairing thoughts, it also brought calmer reflections. First among these was the wonder why the savages made no attempt to destroy them, but had been contented with simply shutting them up?

They wondered, also, at not having heard shots, and only shouts, which they could tell came from the colored people. The voice of the Ethiopian—negro or mulatto—is easily distinguished from that of his white masters. Not a cry of Indian intonation had reached their ears; no yell; nothing that resembled a war-whoop of Comanches!

What could this mean, unusual in an Indian attack—a thing never before heard of? Who could explain the strange behavior of the assailants?

One suggested that the whole affair might be a travesty—a freak of some of the younger and more foolish of the colonist fraternity.

Unlikely as it was, the idea was for a moment entertained—hope like the drowning man catching at straws.

Only for a moment. The affair was too serious, and affected persons of too much importance. No one would dare attempt such a practical joke upon the stern old soldier Armstrong, or the proud young planter Dupre. They were not to be so trifled with.

Besides, there had been the shrieks of the domestics, distinctly heard, and in tones that betokened terror, as well as anguish. There had been groans mingled with them. These could not have been from mere fright, got up by a mad frolic of merrymaking.

If this, it should be over, and the door would have been opened. Silence reigned outside, and still it was shut and locked. That would not be the way to terminate a travesty.

No; the revelry could not be of such sort; and they who thought of it gave up the idea almost as soon as it was suggested.

If the silence at first observed by the assailants had mystified those inside the room, that coming after was equally inexplicable. There was now nor shout nor shriek, groan nor moan—not so much as a murmur!

The profound stillness was soon more than mysterious; it became positively oppressive.

What had occurred outside? What had been done? Had the colored people been all killed—massacred, as it were, in a moment? And had the colonists shared the same fate?

These were the questions exchanged, quickly, and with quivering lips.

No one made attempt to answer them, even to himself.

All were alike under a spell of mystified apprehension; some enfeebled by it; others speechless from the impatient, passionate anger still struggling within their breasts.

To the nine men shut up within the refectory of the old San Saba mission-house—there were nine of them in all—it was a sad, irksome hour—perhaps the saddest and most irksome any of them had ever passed.

To Armstrong, Dupre, and the others who had relatives exposed outside, it was agony indescribable. The prisoners of Cawnpore, or the famed Black Hole of Calcutta, could not have experienced a greater.

A moment of such suffering was enough to drive them mad; and no doubt, continued, it would have done so.

They did not bear it in silence; or only for a short while. Dire passion again got the better of them; and they gave way to cries and angry ejaculations, uttered without any definite aim.

A plan, however, promising practical results occurred to the hunter Hawkins. In the midst of the excitement he sprang upon the sill of a window; and, with cheeks pressed against the iron bars, his lips protruded beyond them, he set up a series of cries—calling for help. He did this regardless of the danger of being shot or speared by the enemy outside.

The others did not interfere, though they had fears for his safety. They expected every moment to see a lance thrust through the window, impaling him on its point. They wondered it was not so; and, seeing him still unscathed, began to think the assailants had gone off. This, too, appeared strange.

Hawkins kept on shouting, though with no hope of being heard by those residing in the *rancheria*.

The hour was too late; the people, fatigued by the toils of the day, plowing and cotton-planting, would be all abed; perhaps also asleep?

Even if awake, there was not much likelihood of their hearing him. The huts were far off—nearly half a mile; and on the opposite side to that in which were the windows of the refectory.

Besides, a grove of timber intervened—the trees standing close, with branches interlocking, and loaded with thick foliage. It was a vegetable curtain, through which sound could not possibly penetrate, any more than through the casemate of a fortress, or the massive walls of a penitentiary.

In addition, there was the *fracas* of the forest; the skirr of tree-crickets, the hooting of owls, the rustling of foliage, stirred by a stiff breeze.

But the old hunter had thoughts of his own—a knowledge unshared by his fellow-captives. On parting from his comrade, Cris Tucker, he had left the latter in a tent which the two inhabited, there being no house-room for them among the *adobe* dwellings. This tent they had pitched on the edge of the grove between the mission-house and the huts, at about a like distance from each.

Hawkins, therefore, was not shouting in utter hopelessness. He knew that Tucker would not be asleep, unless it was the sleep of death. If his comrade still lived, there was a hope that he might hear him.

Relying on it, he continued his cries for help; interlarding them with exclamations that in a strictly Puritanical country might have been deemed profane.

CHAPTER LIV.

A HORRID HECATOMB.

HAWKINS did not send forth his voice in vain. He was heard, though not until he had nearly shouted himself hoarse.

And it was Cris Tucker who heard his shouts. Not from their tent. Tucker might have stayed there all night, and wide awake, without a sound reaching him from the refectory, or any other part of the mission building. As with those at the *rancheria*, the thick standing trees, the wind rustling their leaves, the concert of night birds, reptiles, and insects kept up in constant strident clangor, hindered him from hearing aught else.

That is, so long as he kept within the inclosure of canvas.

But, fortunately for those shut up in the refectory, he did not keep there. There was that which took him out, and nearer to the place of their imprisonment.

It was not mere chance, but came about thus.

The old hunter, on parting with his younger associate, had promised soon to be back. There was a matter of supper soon to be brought on, consisting of a fine turkey they had shot that day; and Cris had commenced roasting it over a fire kindled outside their little shieling of canvas.

Before Hawkins left, the bird was almost ready to be removed from the spit; hence his promise of speedy return.

Of course, Tucker was aware of what was taking him to the "big house"—as the mansion building had come to be called by the colonists. He knew it was an affair of too much import-

ance to be postponed. What they two had that day seen might affect the welfare of the colony—perhaps threatened its existence. He was, therefore, as anxious as his comrade, that immediate communication should be made with Colonel Armstrong; for which purpose Hawkins had proceeded on to the house, Tucker staying to see to their supper.

The turkey, a fat young "gobbler," running grease out of every pore, and causing the fire to flare up around it—was soon "done brown." Perceiving this, Tucker carried the bird inside the tent, and dished it upon the table; the dish being a platter of split wood, rudely whittled into shape. The table itself was only a tree stump, smoothed horizontally at the top. Over it the tent had been erected.

For a time the turkey lay smoking; Tucker having taken seat beside it, to wait for the coming back of his comrade.

At first the position was pleasant enough. The savory odor that pervaded the tent gave promise of an enjoyable repast. It was keenly appetizing, though Cris Tucker's appetite did not

These reflections led to immediate action. After making them, the young hunter drew his knife out of its sheath, seized the bird by the legs, and cut a big slice from its breast.

This eaten, another slice was severed, and swallowed. Then, carving off one of the great thighs, he soon polished the joint clean as a drumstick.

A wing was next similarly clean scraped; when the hunter, now no longer hungry, completed his repast by chawing up the gizzard, as also the liver—the last being a tit-bit upon the prairies, as in a *pate de foies gras de Strasbourg*.

After this feat of gormandizing, Cris Tucker lit his pipe, and, seated beside the mangled remains of the *meleagris*, commenced smoking.

For a time the inhaled nicotine kept him tranquil; though not without wondering why his comrade was so long in putting in an appearance.

When nearly an hour had elapsed, his wonder began to take the shape of apprehension. Not

of nature, the symphony of the southern forest.

There was no reason for his remaining longer outside the house. Though not on terms of social equality with those who occupied it, under the circumstances he could not be deemed an intruder.

With no fear of being so considered, he entered the arched portal, passed under the shadowed *saguan*, and once more emerged into the moonlight within the *patio*.

Then, suddenly he stopped, and stood aghast. For he beheld a sight, that caused his hair to crisp up, almost raising the cap from his head. Down in the hollow quadrangle—inclosed on every side, except that toward heaven—the moonbeams were falling in full effulgence. By their light he saw forms—human forms—lying along the pavement in every possible position. There were the bodies of men and boys, and among them some whose drapery told them to be women. They were of black, brown, or yellow complexion. And on all, either around the throat, on the skull, or upon the breast, there



SURPRISED BY PRAIRIE PIRATES.—PAGE 41.

aced this. It was well whetted without; for neither he nor Hawkins had eaten anything since making their midday meal on the upper plain, where they saw the savages riding past. The scare this sight had given them, coupled with their haste to get home, hindered them from since touching food; and on arriving at their tent both were half famished.

As time passed, and his comrade did not return, Tucker's position, at first pleasant, soon became unendurable. The turkey was getting cold. The rich aroma, that had set his appetite to a still keener edge, was getting dissipated—dying away—wasting itself on the desert air. He could not stand it any longer. He would rather not eat his supper alone, though there could be no bad manners in his doing so. If his friend did not choose to keep faith with him, he did not deserve to be treated otherwise than with like discourtesy. Perhaps Hawkins was enjoying himself up at the house—perhaps having a drink, or it might be two; indulging in a forum of hot whisky toddy? And for that, must he, Cris Tucker, eat his turkey cold?

strange it should, considering the reason for his being left alone.

This soon after became so keen, he could no longer stay in the tent. He would go up to the house, and find out what was detaining Hawkins.

Donning his skin cap, and stepping out into the open air, he set his face for the mission building.

Less than ten minutes' quick walking brought him before its walls, by the main front entrance.

There for a moment he paused, in some surprise at the stillness that surrounded the place. This was profound, to a degree that was almost unnatural.

There were no lights shining through the windows, though this did not mean much. Cris Tucker knew that most of the eyes of the old monkish mansion looked inward. Like those of the monks themselves, they shunned being stared at by outsiders.

For some moments he remained in front of the massive pile, looking at it and listening. He could hear sounds, but only the nocturnal voices

was a hue horridly contrasting—a tint of crimson that resembled blood!

It was blood, as Cris Tucker could tell; blood fast coagulating under the cold moonlight. It was already darkened, almost to the color of ink.

The hunter turned faint, almost sick, as he stood contemplating the hecatomb of corpses. It was a spectacle far more fearful than any ever witnessed upon a battle-field. There men lie in death from wounds given and received under the grand, though delusive, idea of glory. Those Cris Tucker saw must have been given by the red hand of the assassin!

For a moment he stood gazing upon them, scarce knowing what to do.

His first impulse was to turn back, rush out of the courtyard, and away altogether from the place. With all his courage—and the young hunter had a good store of it—the sight was enough to terrify, and cause quick retreat.

He would have made this but for a thought that stayed him. It was a loyal thought, worthy of a backwoodsman. It was about Hawkins.

This body might be among the rest—he was almost sure it would be—and affection for his friend required him to seek for it. There might still be breath in it—a spark of departing life, capable of being called back?

With this hope, however faint, he commenced searching among the corpses.

The spectacle, that well-nigh sickened, also made him feel feeble. He staggered as he passed among the bodies, at times compelled to step over them.

He examined one after another, bending low down above each—lower where they lay in shadow, and it was more difficult to make out their features.

He soon went the round of the courtyard, and completed the scrutiny of all. Living or dead, Hawkins was not among them.

Nor was there the body of any white man. The stricken victims were of every age and both sexes. But all, male as female, were colored people—slaves. Many of them he recognized; knew them to be the house-servants of Colonel Armstrong and Dupre. Where were their masters? Where was everybody? What terrible tragedy had occurred to leave such traces behind it? The traces of murder—of a wholesale, sanguinary slaughter! Who had been the murderers, and where were they?

These self-asked interrogatories, succeeding quick on one another, brought Cris Tucker to a stand, and caused him to reflect.

And while he was reflecting a sound reached his ears, starting him afresh.

It was the sound of a human voice, raised as if shouting for succor!

After listening to it for a few seconds, he became sure it was a cry for help.

It appeared to come from beyond the building, as if the person so appealing were outside. Could it be his comrade?

He did not stay to conjecture why Hawkins should be shouting. He did not remain a moment longer in the courtyard; but, leaping lightly over the dead bodies, glided out through the open gateway.

When outside, he made pause, and listened. He but waited for the voice to direct him; which it did, still shouting for help.

Again he heard it, as before. He was now almost sure of its being Hawkins. The cries appeared to come from the eastern side of the building, that usually called its back.

He made no more pause, but rushed down the angle of the wall, breaking through the bushes like a chased bear.

Nor did he again stop, until under the window whence proceeded the cries.

Looking up, he saw his comrade's face, pressing distractedly against the bars; then heard the old hunter hailing him.

"Cris Tucker! It's you, Cris! Thank the Almighty!"

"What does it all mean, Hawkins?"

"Mean? That's more 'en we can tell. We're shut up here—'twas done by Indysens. Hain't you seen them? They were inside the building. Have you been there?"

"I've been inside, an' see'd a ugly sight. Not Indysens, but their devil's work, I reck'n; an' they've gone off after doin' it."

"What sight? But don't stay to talk. Go round. Get something to break open the door, and let us out. Come, comrade; quick!"

This brought the colloquy to a termination.

The young hunter hastened back to the courtyard as rapidly as he had quitted it; and laying hold of a heavy beam, brought it to bear, like a battering-ram, against the dining-room door.

Massive as this was, and strongly hung upon its hinges, it had to yield to the strength of Cris Tucker, who was a stalwart Kentuckian.

When it was at length laid open, and those inside released, they beheld a spectacle that sent a thrill of horror through their hearts.

But to Colonel Armstrong himself, to Dupre, as to most of the others, there was a worse horror behind: the dark shadow of uncertainty and suspense, more dreadful than reality itself, however disastrous.

On escaping from the place where they had been so long and so irksomely imprisoned, they spoke interrogatively, each asking the question most affecting himself. In the confusion of voices, one could be heard inquiring for a wife, another for a sister, a third for his sweetheart; all hopefully conjecturing whether these still lived, or despairingly fearing that they would find them dead—lying with gashed throats and bleeding breasts, like those they looked at upon the pavement of the patio!

The spectacle before their eyes was sufficiently appalling. But nothing compared with that conjured up in their apprehensions, and which they might soon have to look upon. What they saw might be only a symbol of what they were soon to see.

And amidst the loud, sad, and varied cries for wife, child, sister, and sweetheart, loudest and saddest was the voice of Colonel Armstrong, calling for his daughters.

CHAPTER LV. PURSUIT.

In the court-yard of the San Saba Mission there lay ten corpses, all told.

Those who rushed out of the dining-room did not stay to count them. They were but the dead bodies of slaves; and their fellow-slaves, who had succeeded in concealing themselves, now cautiously emerging from their places of concealment, alone stood over them.

Their masters were too terrified—too anxiously inquiring for those nearer and dearer—to give them more than a glance. They were in fear of finding, not far off, other dead bodies, with skins that were white.

As soon as released from their imprisonment, they ran hither and thither, like maniacs escaped from a mad-house.

Most of Colonel Armstrong's guests made direct for the rancheria. Wharton stayed by his host, sharing his anguished apprehensions.

For, it may be here said, that there was one among the missing on whom the young surgeon had set eyes, and to whom he had given glances of affection, whether or not returned. All along the route of their journey through Texas, he had been assiduously attentive to Helen Armstrong, in hopes of curing her of that melancholy of which he knew not the cause. His was not the medicine "to pluck the rooted sorrow from her brain." Though neither did he know this; and whenever opportunity offered had he continued his assiduities hoping beyond hope. Therefore did he stay by the side of Colonel Armstrong, giving what comfort he could.

The hunters, Hawkins and Cris Tucker, being both bachelors and having no incumbrances of the domestic kind, also remained at the mission, aiding the others in the search, and to stand by with strong arms in the event of the Indians returning to renew the attack.

For it was still not certain they were gone quite away. They might come back to complete the massacre left so inexplicably unfinished.

Of all, Dupre seemed to suffer most. Frenzied with the agony of the hour, the young Creole ran to and fro, as if beside himself.

Colonel Armstrong felt as keenly as he, though the old soldier showed greater calmness. As he called for his children, in turn pronouncing their names, the remnant of the household servants came clustering around him.

Helen's maid was among them, the mulatto girl, Julia. She had evaded the slaughter by shutting herself up in her young mistress' sleeping-chamber.

"Where are they, Jule—my daughters?" was the earnest interrogatory of her master.

The girl, half-hysterical, could only give answer in short, broken sentences, with pauses between. Convulsively she exclaimed:

"Massa Colonel—Massa Dupre—the young ladies both gone out—they went soon after dinner—I not know where. I b'lieve they gone into the garden."

Without waiting to hear more, the white men rushed out, Colonel Armstrong leading, Dupre and Wharton close following.

The names "Helen!" "Jessie!" rung through the inclosure, penetrating every part.

There was no answer, save echoes from the old walls, and other echoes further on—the reverberations of their voices in the forest outside.

The garden was soon traversed—searched everywhere. Now not with any hope that those looked for were alive, but a fear of finding their dead bodies.

They were not found there, nor anywhere; and the conjecture was, they were not dead. Though little less dismal was the alternative thought—that they had been carried off.

Up to this time Colonel Armstrong had preserved a certain equanimity—the stoical strength drawn from age and stern experience. It now gave way, as the worst came before him. The father's heart had been too severely tested; it was on the point of yielding to despair.

The young planter was equally stricken, showing it still more.

It gave them but slight relief, when their fellow-colonists came crowding from the rancheria, with the report that the Indians had not been there. The people dwelling in the adobe huts had seen nothing of the enemy, nor heard aught of what had occurred, till awakened out of their sleep by the return of those who had escaped from the dining-room.

There was need for much questioning now. All seemed clear—too clear. A party of Indians—no doubt that seen by Hawkins and Tucker—had beset the building, their aim being plunder. The half-breed, Fernand, was at the bottom of it, and had concocted the whole scheme. Knowing of Dupre's treasure, he had put himself in communication with the savages, and obtained their co-operation in carrying it off.

Coming through the garden, the robbers had accidentally encountered the two girls, and taken them away, perhaps as a measure of precaution.

This was the summing up, hastily done, as the colonists, coming in, became acquainted with what had occurred.

And now what was to follow?

Pursuit, of course! But how? And in what direction?

Fortunately, there was one man present who, still preserving coolness, knew how to give counsel. It was the hunter Hawkins. He said:

"It's no use, now, our goin' after them in a

hurry. They've had the start too far. We wouldn't have the slightest chance of overtaking them. Not till they get to their roostin' place, wherever that be. I reckon, from what me and Cris Tucker saw, we'll be able to find it. But we must approach them by a different way than ridin' straight on 'em. There were only a score in that party that's been here, but that ain't likely to be all the lot. There may be ten times as many waitin' for them somewhere else. If ye'll take my advice, gentlemen, before startin', you'll fit out in a proper fashion, prepared for anything that may turn up. Then ye'll have a chance to get what ye go after. Let Cris Tucker and me, and some o' the others as are ready, take a run down to the crossing-place, and see if they're gone back over the river. Most like they have; but they mayn't. If not, you'd only lose time by all rushin' there, beside not bein' prepared to keep on. A few of us can ride rapider, an' be back here by the time the rest have their horses and other things ready."

Colonel Armstrong approved of Hawkins' plan. Despite his impatience, the old soldier could perceive that hasty, reckless rushing after the savages might not only end in disappointment, but still further disaster.

It was a dread thought he had to endure—the reflection that his daughters, dear as his own life, were at that moment struggling in the arms of—Oh heaven! hinder him from reflecting upon it!

Dupre, still agitated, was calling for immediate action. He would have insisted upon it, but for being swayed by the more prudent counsel of him he now looked upon as a father.

To this he at length yielded; and the deliberations were brought to a close by all giving assent to the proposal of the hunter.

By this time half a score of the colonists, who had gone back to the rancheria, came up on their horses, armed and accoutered for the scout.

Cris Tucker was among them; he, too, having gone off, and returned now on horseback, holding another horse in hand. It was that of his comrade, Hawkins; who, laying hold of the rein, and throwing his thigh over the saddle, led off in stern, earnest silence; the others in like silence filing after.

Dupre was among those who went, the real leader of the party.

For the brave young planter, who had plunged into the waters of the Red river to save the life of Helen Armstrong, was not likely to stay behind when that of Jessie was at stake.

Stricken with grief, the father stayed behind. But not to give away to it. Instead, the veteran campaigner of the Cherokee wars, as soon as the others were gone, set about organizing the pursuit that was to succeed the reconnoissance.

Long before they returned, the colonists were armed and equipped, ready to take saddle, provisioned for a long chase of the savage despoilers—even though it should lead them to the heart of that desert, of which they had heard so much—the famed *Llano Estacado*.

CHAPTER LVI.

FIENDISH LAUGHTER.

WHILE in tones of terrible distress—the true accents of anguish—Colonel Armstrong was calling for his daughters, they were far beyond reach of his voice.

Unless very near, they could not at that moment have heard him. For both were hooded like hawks; the blankets thrown over their heads, being bound around their necks so closely as to almost smother them.

But they were not near now; and every minute moving further away.

Where were they, and whither going?

Let us follow, and find. Let us trace them along the track by which they were taken; beginning in the garden where they stood face to face with Fernand.

Their being blindfolded, and lifted suddenly aloft, was to them no mystery. They knew it was done by men.

While about to chide the major-domo for his intrusion—still more for the air of impudence he had assumed—they saw behind him what explained both. It was no mere bravado by an insolent subordinate, but the triumph of a betrayer. His commands quick succeeding—to some one unseen—put this beyond doubt; for they were orders speedily executed.

They who obeyed could not be other than Indians. The girls on being seized hold of, before the serapes were thrown over their heads, had caught sight of buckskin dresses, plumes and painted faces.

The arms that raised them from the ground, and bore them rapidly away, could be no other than the brawny arms of savages.

Only for a short distance were they thus transported—over the talus of tumbled bricks, through the breach in the broken wall, and a few paces further.

Then they were placed upon the backs of horses—upon saddle-croups; each with a man mounted in front. To these they were attached by ropes of rawhide; some on foot assisting in the double mount.

To all this they had not submitted, either pa-

tiently, or in silence. Both had struggled, and given utterance to loud shrieks. In vain. Only the first could have been heard any distance off; the others were inaudible at ten paces.

But no one was near to hear—no one with any thought of befriending them. They were surrounded only by enemies—red, ruthless despoilers, to two of whom they were tied.

After being secured, they were started off at a quick pace, and soon ceased to struggle and shout. They saw that to do either was idle. They were now far away from the mission walls; from those who might have heard and could have succored them.

For nearly an hour they were hurried along, suffering extreme torture the while. Pain bodily as mental, for the blankets hooding their heads were of Mexican fabric—*serapes* of Saltillo—so close woven as to be waterproof. So shrouded, they were in danger of suffocation.

Perceiving this, their captors made stop, and with their knives ripped open the central slits—hitherto stitched up—thus giving them a chance to inhale a little air.

Was it a spark of compassion lingering within the savage breast? Or only to preserve the precious spoil they had taken?

Whatever might be the motive, their captives had little time to reflect upon it; for the horses were once more set in motion, and spurred on to the same hurried pace.

Hitherto they had not exchanged speech—partly because the muffling prevented it—but more from their being under a sort of paralysis—surprise, followed by the dumbness of despair.

The behavior of their guards in allowing them to get breath, whether from humanity or not, gave them some satisfaction; and each now thought of communicating with the other.

Before doing so, they listened; in hopes of discovering from the talk of the two men what was going to be done to them. Between these a conversation was being carried on; but it was in a low tone, and in a strange tongue; and after long listening, they could make nothing of it.

They knew there were but two who had charge of them. They could tell that by the hoof-strokes, though not able to see either the men or the horses. For the blankets had been opened only over their mouths, and their eyes were still under the blinding.

Hearing their captors converse in an unknown tongue, they had confidence to speak to one another. As the savages would not be able to understand what was said, there could be no danger in their doing it.

It was Helen who first arrived at this resolve, and first spoke. She said:

"Jessie! Can you hear me?"

"I can, Helen; I do. Oh, God!"

"Ay, God! Let Him be our hope! He may yet rescue us. Keep up your heart—have courage! Something tells me—I don't know what—but something gives me hope we shall yet escape from these horrid creatures. It may be God's will. Pray to Him, as I am doing."

"I have, sister; I am now. But, oh! what of our dear father—of Louis? Both, I fear—"

"Don't fear for them. You needn't. I believe they are safe. I don't think the savages could have killed all our people. Some must have escaped; and they'll be certain to come after us. Ay, and they'll come in time to rescue us—I feel sure. You know there are many among them noted as great hunters and trackers. Such as they can follow us anywhere."

"Louis will lead them. He will give all his gold. Yes, he will—"

Jessie's speech was interrupted by a peal of loud, mocking laughter. It was double, coming from the two men to whom they were tied. It shook the bodies of both, till they could feel the horrid vibration.

Before it had ended, the horses were wading knee-deep in water, and the plunging of their hoofs rendered inaudible all other sounds.

They were evidently fording a stream. A wide stream, as could be told by the long-continued plashing of water, whose cold spray-drops dashed back against the blankets.

The sisters were again silent. No wonder, after hearing that laugh, intoned with hellish scorn, as if it came from the throats of demons!

As its loud cacklings became blended with the sound of the surging water, they were under an impression indescribable. It was more than fear—it was awe—appalling awe—and they trembled as the horses went wading in.

To both had simultaneously occurred the thought, that the men who had them in charge were not Indians. Indians could not have understood what they had said. Evidently their guards understood it, since it had elicited that burst of mirth, whose mocking tone told of perfect comprehension.

And it was no relief to know that they were with white men; on the contrary, it but added to their apprehensions. In the breast of a savage there might be some spark of pity—there is often a spirit of chivalry. Whereas, the laugh that came from the throats of those guarding them had in it the true ring of ruffianism. Men who would thus mock them in their misery, could have no humanity in their hearts; and from them no mercy need be expected.

Who could these men be? This was the question each was asking of herself.

For, knowing that conversation could not pass between them without being overheard, they spoke not.

Instead, both now busied themselves in silent surmising, their hearts full of sad presentiment.

Jessie's belief was, that one of the two fellows was Fernand. The half-blood could speak English, and therefore understand what had been said. As to who was the other, she could not give a guess. She did not even try. Her mind was sufficiently exercised in thinking it was Fernand. She remembered the strange glances he had from time to time cast upon her. Their meaning, scarce understood then, was no longer to be mistaken. And she in his power! Her blood ran cold at the thought.

Helen, too, had her belief, along with prognostications equally repugnant. She had taken it for granted that one of their guards was Dupre's servant—the one who rode the same horse with her sister. It was not of him she most thought, or had most fear. Something seemed to say to her, that the form before her, in close contact with her own, was that of a man well known—an enemy already declared, from whom she need expect no compassion.

It might be only a fancy engendered by her fears. But if not, and the conjecture should prove true, what was to become of her?

"Oh, God!" she groaned, inwardly, as the fearful forecast swept like a torrent through her soul.

Just then, the plashing of the water ceased, and the hoofs sprung with firm rebound upon the bank.

Here the horses were pulled up, and the two men exchanged speech. One said:

"I reck'n we may just as well set down hyar. Cap said we war to wait for 'em under the big oak. I don't see the use o' our goin' on to it; gropin' our way through them bushes and gettin' our duds tore by thorns. This place is every bit as good, for all the time we'll hev to stay. I guess our fellows won't make much delay, once they've got what they goed for. They'll be arter us hot haste; and, seein' how slow we've come, they oughter soon be hyar. S'pose we hitch up, and wait where we air? What d' say, lieutenant?"

"No, Bill," responded the other, in tone slightly authoritative; "we shall go on to the oak, and wait there. I have my reasons."

"Oh, all right. It's jest the same to me. Only I'm darned tired o' totin' this precious burden at my back, beauty tho' she be. I s'pose I kin promise myself not to have the trouble any further, as Cap'll want to take my place himself. Well, I'll be agreeable to that; an' if it's any pleasure to him, he's wonderful welcome to it. You lead on, lieutenant; I ain't quite sure about the way."

He addressed as "lieutenant" this time did not deign rejoinder; he merely touched his horse with the heel, and moved on along the road.

He did not proceed far—only about twenty paces—when he again pulled up, and looked inquiringly toward the timber that skirted the edge of the road. He looked on the left side.

There an opening was seen, and what appeared to be a path, making into the thick-standing trees. It was narrow, and with the semblance of a cattle track, or trail made by deer following one another in file. It was barely wide enough for a man to make way along it afoot; still more difficult on horseback.

But that this could be done, even by a horse double-mounted, was proved by the lieutenant turning his, and heading him into the path, with an air of confidence that showed previous acquaintance with it.

All this without a word.

In like silence Bill entered after, and the two moved on among trees, whose branches, laden with parasitical plants, gave a double luxuriance of leaves, that, arched over the track, imparted to it the appearance of a tunnel.

Along it they continued, the bent twigs swishing back with rebound, and clouting against the cheeks of their captives.

As it chanced, they were protected by the *serapes* still over their heads.

But what cared they now? Or what need they care? They made no complaint, nor thought of making any. Hope had departed, and despair stricken them dumb. Moving along that shadowy path, they felt like martyrs being conducted to the stake, or victims to a scaffold!

CHAPTER LVII.

A RUFFIAN TRIUMPHANT.

PROCEEDING at a slow pace, now impeded by the dense underwood, now by the trunks, standing so close that the horses could scarce squeeze between, the captives were carried on.

Not very far along the narrow trace; for it was of no great length. Only some three hundred yards, when it ended in an opening; this easily told by the moon's light striking down through the tree-tops, and whitening the surface of the ground.

It was a glade of circular shape, some sixty yards in diameter, a gigantic tree standing in its center, and shadowing over half its surface. This was a lime-oak, with a trunk full forty feet

in girth, and branches spreading like a banner. Though itself an evergreen, but little of its verdure could be seen, either in summer or winter, by day or by night. Here and there, only some leaves on the extremity of twigs, that penetrated through the dense masses of Spanish moss; this thickly clustering on its boughs, and hanging in festoonery from its far-stretching horizontal limbs.

Under the shimmering of the moonbeams the hoary parasite now showed white and weird. The deepening streamers, stirred by the night breeze, waved to and fro, like ghosts moving in a minuet. When for a moment still, they might have been mistaken for the waters of a cataract suspended in its fall, their spray becoming suddenly transformed into hoar frost, and their jets to gigantic icicles. Centrally amidst these the great trunk ascended; grim and corrugated as the skin of an alligator.

The hoary Titan of the forest stood alone. For the space of two poles' length around the surface was clear of timber growth, as also of underwood. It was as if the other trees, deeming it their monarch and master, dared not intrude upon his domain.

There could be no mistaking the spot. Surely must it be the rendezvous appointed by the robber chief.

The two men in charge of the captives were evidently acquainted with the place. On entering the glade, they did not stop, but rode on across the ring of light, and drew rein under the shadow of the tree.

The one in charge of Helen went first; but when inside the darkened circle, waited for the other to come up.

When their heads were together, he spoke some words, only audible to him intended to hear them. They were:

"You stay here, Bill. I'm going round to the other side. I want a word with her, before the rest of our fellows are forward."

While speaking, he signalized the form seated on the croup behind him, by a slight turn of his head, and a backward shrug of the shoulder.

"All right," was the response, significant of a sinister understanding.

The two parted, the lieutenant continuing on around the tree.

When on opposite sides they were as much separated as if a thick wide wall was between. The trunk was all of fifteen feet diameter, with buttresses extending beyond. It forced them four times this distance apart; so that they could not see, and scarce hear one another, unless calling aloud.

He who had shown reluctance to leave the river's edge, at once set about dismounting.

He undid the knot, and let loose the rawhide rope, that coupled him with his captive. Then slipping out of the saddle, he drew the latter down, and laid her at full length along the ground.

Having so disposed of her, he pulled out his tobacco pipe; filled it; struck a light; and commenced smoking.

Pipe in mouth, and bridle in hand, he stood holding his horse; apparently without further thought of the fair form lying prostrate at his feet. He appeared to be a stern old sinner, whose weakness was not woman. Perhaps on this account had he been selected for the duty he was now discharging. The captive he had care of, was not spoil for him; and his demeanor told that he knew it. Instead of paying court, or even deigning to hold converse with her, he stood rigidly erect, his face turned toward the ford, as if listening for sounds to come from that direction. Impatiently listening; for every now and then a curse came from his lips, between the puffs of smoke, betraying uneasiness. He was thinking of something else than a sweetheart; he was speculating about the stolen silver of Dupre, and how much might be his share of it.

Very different was the behavior of his comrade, as, also, the scene at that instant transpiring on the other side of the tree.

There, too, was the form of a woman lying along the earth—Helen Armstrong—still shrouded in the *serape*, confined in it by cords.

Now more than ever; for not only were her arms tied, but also her ankles. He who guarded her seemed to fear, that foot-free she might make an attempt to rush off into the timber, and so escape him. To prevent it he had made use of the lazo late lashing the bodies of both. With this he had tied her limbs together, depriving them of the power of motion, as effectually as if the sinews had been severed.

After thus securing his captive, the man stepped to one side, leaving her alone. He had thrown his bridle-rein over a piece of bark that projected from the trunk of the tree. Though it did not need this; for his fatigued horse stood without stirring.

He strode back to the animal, but not to stay there. He only took something out of a pouch that hung over the horn of the saddle. It looked like a towel, or napkin, that had seen service, and was soiled.

Holding it in his hand, he walked away from the horse, directing his steps toward the river; which ran near by—some fifty yards from the great tree, and less than half the distance from

the encircling glade. It was here approachable by a wide, well-trodden path, which led to a shelving break in the bank; evidently a favorite drinking place for the wild forest creatures frequenting the adjacent tract of timber.

Descending the slope, he stopped by the water's edge, and stooping down dipped his dirty towel in the stream. Then with a piece of soap, which he had also taken from the saddle-pouch, he rubbed the rag till a lather was produced.

With this he commenced washing his face; and continued the operation till the color of his skin was entirely changed. It had been of a coppery hue, with a blotch of scarlet upon both cheeks and a band of bright yellow traversing above the brows—all this being but the insignia of an Indian warrior.

It took him some little time to clear off the escutcheon; for the paint had been laid on with a view to lasting for at least some days. However, the soap did good service, and at length the face became fairly purified.

No one, now, would have taken its owner either for an Indian or a warrior; but a white man, with features not unhandsome—still having a cast sinister as though they belonged to a demon.

They were not improved by the change of color. The pallid hue that succeeded their purging, had a ghastly, cadaverous look; and with dark eyes, glancing from deep hollows, the effect was to produce fear in the heart of the beholder.

Nobody beheld them then, though there was one destined to do so soon—one for whom their purification was intended. It was the captive he had left under the tree.

"I'll give her a surprise," he muttered, as he finished his lavatory task; "one such as she has not had since leaving the States. I'd bet long odds she'll be more frightened at seeing my face now, than when painted Indian I laid hold of her in the garden. Now for her torture and my triumph."

Saying this, he threw his rag into the river, the soap along with it; and once more putting on his plumed head-dress, strode back toward the tree.

When again under its shadow, he stopped, and for a time stood listening. Once he started, fancying he had heard the tramp of a horse.

"It can't be," he said reflectively. "No. They can't possibly have finished the affair so soon. I'll have plenty of time for a *tele-a-tete* with my fair charmer."

Saying this, he continued on to where his captive lay. Then, bending down, commenced speaking words that might well have driven her mad.

The first were:

"So! Helen Armstrong! At length—at last I have you, sure and safe. Oh! it is sweet—sweet—sweet!"

That voice—its tone—there could be no mistaking either. Besides, the words were significant. She who heard, could not fail to know who had spoken them.

Her thoughts, hitherto, had been but suspicions and presentiments. All this was over now—changed to certainty of the direst, dreaddest kind. The man stooping above her head, and pouring speech into her ears, was the same who had made desolate her life.

He who said "sweet," was the cause of all her bitterness. Beyond doubt was it *Richard Darke!*

CHAPTER LVIII.

SPECTRAL EQUESTRIANS.

THE lower crossing of the San Saba, so oft spoken of in our tale, calls for description topographically. There the stream—several hundred yards in width—ran in smooth, tranquil current, between banks wooded to the water's edge. The trees were chiefly cotton-wood, with a commingling of oak, elm, tulip, wild China, and pecan, among them the *magnolia grandiflora*. In short, such a forest as may be seen in many parts of the Southern States. On both sides of the river, for many miles up and down, the timbered tract was continuous; extending also back over the level bottom, for a mile or more, till its outer selvidge became broken into glades, some of them resembling flower gardens, while others were thickets of the *arundo gigantea*, in the language of the country "canabrakes." Beyond, the bottom was open prairie covered with a sea of green, waving grass—the *gramma* of south-western Texas—this extending back to the bluffs that ran parallel to the river.

On each side of the crossing the channel was reached by a road, or rather an open avenue in the timber, which appeared to have been felled. Doubtless it had been by the former proprietors of the mission; or it may be, the military who served its garrison. Since, the path had been kept clear of obstructing forest growth, by the passage of wild animals,—herds of horses and cattle—as also by raiding parties of red-men who rode occasionally along it.

On the northern side it approached the river by two distinct trails, that united just before entering the wooded tract. One of these was the main road, coming up from the Colorado; which, after skirting the timber, turned sharp into it, toward the crossing. The other ran direct from the bluff; its *raison d'être*, being

gorge which gave passage to and from the upland plain.

The former was the road that had been traversed by Colonel Armstrong and his wagons on their way to the mission; the latter that taken by Hawkins and Tucker in their hunt.

By the former came Clancy and his companions, on the track of the emigrant train, Clancy in time, perhaps, intending to cast his lot among the colonists. But not till he had fulfilled that vow, made upon the grave of his murdered mother and satisfied the vengeance burning in his breast. Ay, still torturing him, as on that day when Richard Darke held before his fast-filming eyes the portrait of Helen Armstrong!

He had sworn not to take any rest, until this purpose should be accomplished. The oath was figurative; yet almost literally had he kept it, up till that hour when he and his companions made their night-halt near the crossing of the San Saba. Even there he would not have stayed all night, but that his fellow-travelers were tired and Woodley wished it. Clancy wanted to continue on to the mission.

Though he did not intend showing himself there, or letting anyone know he was alive. For that might frustrate all his aims. His object was to approach the settlement, near enough to get news from it, but still to keep apart, till the time came for declaring himself.

He felt satisfied, that not far from the woman he loved, he would find the man he hated—having good reason for hating him.

It was a little below the crossing where he and his companions had made halt. Woodley, who had hunted there in days gone by, was acquainted with the locality, and chose the spot for their camp.

As already known, before reaching the ford, he had diverged into the timber tract on their left. Through this he had conducted them to the river's bank, to a spot surrounded by low bushes, over whose tops they could command a view of the stream and the crossing place.

And soon after making camp, fatigued, they all fell asleep.

All except Clancy. He could not sleep. On that night was he more restless than ever, though not knowing why. Had he been endowed with *clairvoyant* vision, and seen what at that moment was passing only ten miles further up-stream, he would have started suddenly to his feet, rushed toward his horse, calling upon his fellow-travelers to follow; and then, plunging across the ford, without fear of what was before him, spurred on toward the San Saba Mission, as if the building were in flames, and only he had the power to extinguish them.

Without the gift of *clairvoyance*, he could not know of the terrible tragedy there being enacted. Yet at that hour was his mind filled with a strange foreboding, something like a pre-science of evil!

He tried to sleep, but could not—not even repose was permitted him. For long he lay tossing upon the grassy bed, the others asleep around him, and soundly, as he could tell by their stertorous snoring.

Woodley alone slept lightly; the old hunter was habituated, as he himself said, "allers to do the possum bizness, w' one eye open."

He had repeatedly heard Clancy's shiftings and turnings, coupled with involuntary exclamations, as of a man murmuring in his dreams. One of these, louder than the rest, at length awaking, caused him to inquire what his comrade wanted, and what was the matter with him.

"Oh, nothing," replied Clancy; "only that I can't sleep—that's all."

"Can't sleep? Wharfor can't ye? Sure ye oughter be able by this time. Ye've had furtteen enuf to put ye in the way o' slumberin' soun' as a hummin' top. An' ye've slep' tol'able well, other nights since we struck Texin sile."

"I can't to-night. I don't know why."

"Prehaps ye've swallowed somethin' as don't sit well on your stummuk? Or, it may be, the klimat o' this river bottom. Sartin it do feel a leetle dampish, 'count o' the river fog; tho', as a general thing, the San Saba valley air reck'ned among the healthiest spots in Texas. S'pose ye take a pull out o' this hyar flask o' myen. As ye know, it's the best Monongaheely, an' for a sedimentary o' the narves thar ain't the like to be foun' in any drug-shop in creashun. I'll bet my last dollar on thet. Take a suck, Charley, and see what it'll do for ye."

"It would have no effect. I know it wouldn't. It isn't nervousness that's keeping me awake—something quite different."

"Oh!" grunted the old hunter, in a tone that told of comprehension. "Somethin' quite different? I reck'n I can guess what thet somethin' air—the same as keeps other young fellurs awake, thinkin' o' thar sweethearts. Foller my device. Take a pull out o' the flask, an' ye'll soon be in the arms o' Morpheus, whar ye'll forgit all about the gurl. Yar know ye needn't now hev any fear. The trail shows cl'arly thet they've got safe to their destinashun. An' ef we're a-minded we kin be thar ourselves, less'n a kuppel o' hours arter sun-up the mornin' mornin'. Thar's nothin' to hinder us to git to the mission-house afore the time o' breakfastin'; and ef we made welkim to a pone o' corn-bread an' a

hunk o' bacon, to say nothin' o' the best o' coffee doin's, then Kurnel Armstrong hev changed his ways in changin' his place o' abidin'. When he lived in ole Mississippi, Sime Woodley, for one, war allus welkim to the best in his house. You say ye object goin' cl'ar up to the place jest yet, an' you've gi'n me yur reezuns. Prehaps you're right. Wal, let's not think o' thet now. Ye want a nap, Charley. Put some o' this physis inside y'ur skin, an' you'll be asleep in the shakir' o' a goat's tail."

The dialogue came to a close by Clancy following the old hunter's advice, and taking a "pull" from his whisky-flask.

After which he laid himself along the grass; and, with blanket wrapped around him, once more essayed to sleep.

As before, he was unsuccessful. Although for a while he lay tranquil and courted slumber, it would not come. He again kept shifting about; and at length rose to his feet, his hound starting up at the same time.

Woodley, once more awakened, saw that his potion had failed of effect, and counseled trying it again.

"No," said Clancy, it would do no good. I don't think the strongest sleeping-draught in the world would be of any use to me this night. Simeon Woodley, I have a presentiment."

"Presentiment o' what?"

"That we'll be too late."

Clancy pronounced these words in a tone of solemnity, that told of apprehensions keenly felt—whether false, or prophetic.

"That air's all nonsense," rejoined Woodley, in an endeavor to reason his comrade out of what he deemed an idle fancy. "The night o' nonsense it air to a sartinty. Wheesh!"

The final exclamation, uttered in an altered tone, was accompanied by a start—the hunter suddenly raised his head from the saddle on which it rested. It had no connection with the previous part of his speech. In what he was about to say, he had been interrupted by hearing a sound, or fancying he heard one. At the same instant the hound pricked up his ears; as it did so, giving utterance to a low growl.

"What is't, I wonder?" interrogated Woodley, in a whisper, as he placed himself in a kneeling posture, his eyes sharp set upon the dog. Again the animal jerked its ears, growling as before.

"Lay hold o' the critter, Charley! Don't let him gi'e tongue. Thar's somethin', or somebody approachin' somewhar."

Charley caught the dog; drew it close up against his knees, and by speech and gesture admonished it to remain silent.

The well-trained animal knew what was wanted; and crouching down by its master's feet, ceased making demonstration.

Meanwhile Woodley had laid himself flat along the ground, with ear pressed close to the turf.

There was a sound, sure enough; though not what he fancied having heard but the moment before. That was like a human voice, in laughter, afar off; and might be the "too-who-ha" of the great Texan owl, or the bark of the prairie wolf. This now reaching his ears was less ambiguous, and he had no difficulty in determining its character. It was the sound of water violently agitated—churned as by the hoofs of horses trampling across the stream.

Clancy, standing erect, heard it too.

The backwoodsman did not remain much longer prostrate; only a moment to assure himself of the direction. It was from the ford. The dog had looked that way, on first starting up.

Woodley got upon his feet, and the two men stood close together, silently listening.

They had no need to listen longer; for their eyes were above the tops of the bushes, and they saw what was disturbing the water.

Two horses were crossing the river. They had just got clear of the timber's shadow on the opposite bank, and were making toward mid-stream.

Clancy and Woodley, occupying higher ground, could see the horses outlined against the shining surface, and tell there were but two.

Nor had they any difficulty in making out that they were mounted. What puzzled them was the manner. Their riders did not appear to be men; they did not look like anything human!

There was a haze overhanging the river, like gauze thrown over some precious piece of plate. It was the white filmy mist that enlarges objects beyond their natural size, producing the mystery of *mirage*. By its magnifying effect both horses and riders appeared of gigantic dimensions. The former seemed Mastodons, the latter Titans bestriding them!

Both appeared beings not belonging to the earth, but creatures of some weird wonder-world—existences not known on our planet, or only in ages past!

CHAPTER LIX.

DOUBLE MOUNTED.

IN truth was it a singular spectacle that came under the eyes of Clancy and his comrade. The horsemen, if such they were, had now got well out into the water—near to mid-stream—when, with the moon glistening upon its surface, shone

like molten silver. Underneath, both forms were of true equine outline; but above, the figures were not those of men; nor like anything of human mind.

And if demons, they were double-headed; for there appeared two distinct heads rising out of one body!

The hunters remained gazing at the odd apparition. And wondering as well, their wonder not unmingled with fear. It was a sight to make stout hearts tremble; and though none could have been stouter than theirs, both were for a time under a sort of supernatural law.

It was only a spell of short duration. Then reason resumed its sway; and they saw that the spectacle hitherto puzzling them was, like most other mysteries, simple when understood.

It was Woodley who first offered the explanation, though Clancy needed it not. Simultaneously had he arrived at the conclusion to which his comrade had come.

The latter said, in *sotto voce*—almost in a whisper:

Woodley stood considering. Then said:

"I suspect we shan't. Thar's but two buck Injuns. Their does won't count much in a scrimmage. An' ef they shed show their teeth an' toenails, me an' you needn't feel afeard, I reck'n. We're good for bigger odds than thet. Prehaps, howsomever, we'd better roust up Heywood, lettin' Harkness an' the mulatter lie still. Ye-es; on second thought, let's hev Heywood 'long wi' us. Ned! Ned!"

The summons was not spoken aloud; only whispered into Heywood's ear; who, on hearing it, started, and then sat up.

Another whisper caused him to spring to his feet.

When erect, he saw why he had been aroused. A glance cast toward the river told that. The strangely-ridden horses were still visible; though now, having nearly accomplished the crossing, they were just entering into the shadow of the trees that selvidged the nether bank.

In a few hurried words Woodley made his younger comrade acquainted with his and Clancy's

"Our horses?" suggested Heywood. "Hadn't we better be mounted?"

"No," said Woodley. "Ef the Injuns make to ride off, we kin soon k'ing 'em to a stan', by shootin' down thar critters. Ef we disturb our hosses, they mout hear us, and put into the thick timmer, whar we'd never agin set eyes on 'em. I know the trail that leads out from the river—every fut'o it. They're boun' to kum along that, an' we kin be thar afore 'em, and hev 'em in a trap. Thar need be no shootin' done. Onc't we git our claws in thar bridle-reins they're ours. Havin' their squaws along, as they 'pear to hev, they ain't likely to make resistance. Besides, arter all, they may be friendly. Ef they air, it ud be pity to kill 'em. Thar's no need to do that. We kin capter 'em by ambuskade eezy enuf."

"Of course we can," assented Clancy. "Le no shot be fired, unless absolutely necessary. We must not spill innocent blood."

"Thar'll be no need," reiterated Woodley. "trust thet to me. Kum on!"



THE SPECTRAL HORSEMAN.

"Two hosses, both o' 'em rid dubble."

After a short interval he continued:

"Them ridin' look like Injuns. Don't ye see tufts o' feathers rising over thar crowns? That's Injun head-wear for sartin. The critters behind look like squaws. I guess they air squaws, though mostwise on these purairas the Injun women hev a hoss apiece to theirselves. It air kewrious they shed be ridin' two-and-two. Still more kewrious 'bout only the two kupples bein' thegither. That purplexes this chile, an' makes him think, whoever them dubble riders is, they deserve lookin' arter. By good luck we've got the devantage of them, an' kin do thet. They're boun' to kum out on this side the crossin', and sure to take the reg'lar trail as leads on through the timmer. Thar we kin intercep' them by a near cut I knows on. Let's do it Charley!"

"What about these?" asked Clancy, pointing to their still slumbering comrades. "Hadn't we better awake them? We may stand in need of their assistance."

cy's intention; and for a while the trio, holding their rifles in hand, remained in consultation.

It was not thought necessary to wake Harkness or Jupiter. It would not be wise. Any noise made, or time wasted, and the Indians might take alarm, go back to the other bank, and so escape being captured.

For on capturing them the three hunters had now fully resolved; Woodley having impressed on both his younger associates the advantage of this proceeding.

His reasons were thus succinctly stated:

"It air allers best to take up Injuns when ye git the chance. They're putty sartin to 'a' been 'bout some deviltry anyhow, the which kin be determined arter they're in hand. 'S like 's not this lot's been pilferin' from the settlers, and air now toatin' off thar plunder. Ef 'tain't so, arter we've grupp'd 'em we kin let the critters go agin, an' thar's no harm done. But best to be on the safe side. Tharfor let's stop 'em and see."

The three were about starting forward, when a fourth figure appeared by their side. It was the mulatto. A life of many sufferings had made him also a light sleeper, and he had been for some time lying awake. Although the others only conversed in whispers, he had heard enough to make him aware of something about to be done in which there might be danger to Clancy. This would be as danger to himself. The fugitive slave, now free, would have laid down his life for the man who had manumitted him.

He begged to be taken along, and permitted to share their danger—whatever it might be.

There could be no objection, and Jupiter was joined to the party.

Again there was a pause before starting out. What about Harkness? Should he be kept under surveillance? He had not lately been treated by them as a prisoner. Still, he had been but little trusted, and it might not be safe now. It was just possible the double traitor

might still be in league with those he professed to have last betrayed; and that his abandoning them was a pretense to serve some sinister purpose. His new associates had kept an eye on him all along the journey. Now more than ever might it be necessary.

They stood hesitating, uncertain. Then Simeon Woodley cut things short, by grasping the collar of Harkness's coat, rudely shaking him out of his slumber, and jerking him erect upon his feet.

Without waiting for the astonished sleeper to utter a word of remonstrance, Woodley whispered into his ear:

"Kum along, Joe Harkness! Keep close arter us, an' don't ask any questyuns. Thar, Jupe," he continued, "do you take care o' him. Now, boys, let's on! We'll hev bare time to get to the place whar the Injuns must pass. Step as if ye war treadin' on eggs."

Saying this, he gave Harkness a shove that sent him staggering into the arms of the mulatto.

The latter, drawing a long stiletto-like knife, from a sheath that hung over his hip, held it before Harkness' eyes, as he did so, saying:

"Massa Harkness, you keep close by me. Go on afore—I follow. If you try leave the track, look out for this blade. It sure go between your back-ribs."

The shining steel, coupled with the sheen of the mulatto's white teeth, set in a stern, determined smile, was enough to hold Harkness honest, whatever might be his intent. He made no reply; but tremblingly stepped into the place pointed at.

A line, in single file, had been already formed, Sime Woodley at its head. It would be necessary for them to proceed thus, he said, as the path he intended taking was too narrow for two horses abreast.

After some further cautions, spoken in undertone, he started off, Clancy close following, with his hound held in leash, Heywood third, Harkness fourth, and Jupiter with his long-bladed knife bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER LX.

A SMOKER MADE CAPTIVE!

AFTER resolving upon the capture of what Simeon Woodley supposed to be "a kuppel o' buck Injuns an' thar squaws," no time was lost in the endeavor to carry out their determination. Woodley's plan was to get out on the ford-road, and there lie in wait, till the Indians should come riding along.

That they would come that way there was little doubt; though it was possible they might encamp on the river's edge, and there remain 'er the night.

In the latter case it would only be necessary to make a change in the programme, by capturing them in their camp. One way or other, they must be made prisoners; so Woodley said. And so saying, he resolved first to attempt the ambushade.

The place he intended for this was upon the road edge, about two hundred yards from the river—further off than the side-trace the supposed Indians had taken. From the hunter's camp it was accessible by a similar narrow trail, entering upon the opposite side of the road; along which Woodley now conducted them.

They reached the spot, just as the plunging ceased, and the horses could be heard climbing up out of the river's channel. Their hoofs struck hard, as they strained against the sloping bank.

"We'll soon hev 'em hyar," whispered Simeon Woodley.

In a moment more the trampling was suspended, and for some time remained so.

"They've stopped to fix thar ridin' gear, I reck'n," again whispered Woodley. "They needn't, for all o' the furrer they've got to go. Durnashun!"

As the hunter uttered this exclamation, he sprang out upon the road. It came from his hearing the horses again in motion, and knowing by their tread they were not coming toward him. On the contrary, they appeared to have turned and were going off another way.

"Durnashun!" he a second time exclaimed, and with more earnest emphasis, "What are they up to? Sounds as if they war takin' up the river bank. We'll hev to foller 'em. Kum on, fellurs! Keep clost arter me. Look to yur dog, Clancy. Don't let the anymal gi'e as much as a yirr, or we'll never get a glimpse o' them Injuns agin. I'd 'a' bet my life on their comin' long hyar. But they hain't; the which o' itself looks kewrous. Durnashun!"

For the third time thus venting his disappointment, the backwoodsman glided off in the direction of the river, the others keeping after.

Before reaching the bank they all stopped, and listened. The dull thud of hoofs, still audible, made it sure the Indians had turned up-stream. It was evident they were still continuing on in that direction.

The hoof-strokes told they were going slowly and deliberately, as if looking for a place to put up for the night.

Soon after, the trampling was again suspended; and so long that it became clear that they had come to a halt and dismounted.

The pursuers were well satisfied at this. They could approach with greater caution, taking their own time.

Still they must not make delay; and, as soon as they had got the bearings of the ground, they tightened grasp upon their guns, and once more moved forward.

It occupied some little time to discover the side-trace, which they supposed the Indians must have taken after separating from the ford road.

And while searching for this, they saw something that counseled them to increased caution, while causing them some alarm. The road was covered with horse-tracks, the toes turned toward the river; and horses that must have passed recently along it.

That same day, said Clancy and Woodley in a breath; perhaps that same night.

And there had been at least a score of them. Unshod horses, too. It could not have been any party of Colonel Armstrong's colonists. Who then? Beyond doubt, Indians!

So much the more reason for capturing those they were after. As prisoners, they might be made to give information about the others that had gone across the stream; these last, perhaps, a hostile band scheming some trouble for the new settlement?

"Let's take the two prisoners. That's the fust thing to be dud," was the counsel that came from Woodley.

Acting upon it, they turned into the narrow trace, and commenced moving along it, now more cautiously than ever. Almost at every step they made pause; looking before them and listening.

After proceeding about two hundred yards they came in sight of a spot where the timber showed a break. They could tell this by the moonbeams striking through to the ground.

In the center of this opening stood a gigantic tree, whose branches, laden with Spanish moss, shadowed a large space. Outside its shadow was a ring illumined by the light.

Creeping closer to the edge of the opening, they stood in bent attitudes, gazing across the moonlit belt into the obscurity beyond.

At first they could discern nothing, so perfectly opaque was the darkness underneath the tree; more difficult for the eye to penetrate through the cross light.

Fortunately there were fireflies, Nature's living lamps of the tropic night, that give cheer to the gloomiest recesses of a southern forest. A swarm of these insects, thick as bees, were flitting to and fro beneath the draped branches, with the sparkle of ball-room belles moving through the mazes of a cotillion.

Their united coruscation rendered luminous the shadowed space; but with a fitful, unsteady gleam. It was, however, steady enough for Simeon Woodley to trace some figures that formed no part of the forest. There was a man alongside a horse, both standing at rest. And, lying upon the ground, another form, not so easily determined, though to all appearance a woman.

As soon as Simeon Woodley had satisfied himself about their character, he said, in a whisper: "One o' the two lots we see'd crossin' the river. Whar's the t'other, I wonder?"

Clancy made no reply. He, too, had observed the group, and was wondering where the others were.

"Like enuf on the furrer side o' the tree," suggested Woodley. "I reckon I hear them talkin' thar; thar voices nigh drowned by the skirlin' o' the crickets. Le's just capter the one we see. The t'other ain't fur off. Bein' now afoot, neyther's likely to escape us—specially wi' the squaws to bother 'em. F'r all that, they mout git away. Injuns is mighty quick in thar movements, as I've know'd afore now. They kin scuttle into timmer, an' make thar way among it, jess like wild anymals. As we've tuk the intension to capter 'em, we mustn't let 'em slide, nohow—leastwise not till we've l'art what they're arter; the which I'll lay twenty to one air some trick o' thievin'."

"It can do no harm to know," rejoined Clancy, like his companion, speaking in a whisper. "If innocent, we can let them go again. What will be our best way to get hold of them, without risk of doing them an injury? I shouldn't wish that."

"Wal; we mout make a surround o' them by some o' us creepin' roun' to the t'other side, unner kiver o' the trees. We kin spare time for it, as I reck'n they're good to keep thar groun' for the balance o' the night. It air kewrous, too, that buck Injun stannin' up, and the squaw lyin' along at his feet. Beside, the boss appears to be still unner saddle an' bridle. That don't look like campin'. See! Durn me ef the Injun ain't smokin'! I kin smell the bacca, an' yonner's the spark glintin' in the head o' his pipe. They ain't a goin' to camp hyar. It's more like they're waitin' for several more o' thar sort to kum along—preehap the party whose tracks we've see'd on the road. Tharfore we musn't talk 'bout surroundin' 'em, nor yit stay longer talkin', or we may git surrounded ourselves. So I say, le's rush right on 'em now."

"Agreed," rejoined Clancy, Heywood also signifying assent.

"Hev your weepens handy, then. Now boys, arter me!"

As he spoke, the backwoodsman bounded forward, the others following in single file.

And soon after, like shadows, the five human figures were seen flitting across the moonlit space—the dog leaping lightly alongside.

Before the savage could make stir, or change his attitude, Simeon Woodley had him by the throat; choking him till the pipe started from between his teeth, its scattered sparks mingling with the flashes of the fireflies.

CHAPTER LXI.

RESCUED.

To return to Richard Darke.

While Clancy and his comrades were slowly feeling their way along the obscure forest-path, he was again cowering over his captive.

Before they had reached the opening around the oak, he was back from his ablutions.

He had already addressed to her those words, which he knew would lead to his being recognized.

If not, and to make sure, he repeated them, as before apostrophizing her by name.

"Yes, Helen Armstrong! At length—at last—I have you; sure and safe. Oh! it is sweet, sweet, sweet!"

To his speech, exulting and passionate, she made no response. She was overwhelmed with a sense of utter helplessness. She well knew that anything she might say would be of no avail.

She had started on recognizing the voice. It was less surprise than a spasmodic movement, such as one makes who has trodden upon a snake, or come face to face with an assassin. It was this last thought that thrilled her.

After it she was still again—so still, that her heart could be heard beating.

He who knelt beside her heard it, and knew it was throbbing in pain. It caused him no compassion—not the slightest touch of it. On the contrary, it seemed but to add to his exultation; since, for the second time, he had repeated the speech, in a tone still more sardonic.

Not eliciting any rejoinder, he continued:

"Need I tell you who I am, Helen Armstrong! Surely it is not necessary! Though it's been some time since we met, and a long way off, my voice, I take it, will be remembered. If not, a circumstance may recall our last interview. It was under a magnolia-tree, with a knot-hole, making a convenient letter-box for two lovers; one of whom is no longer alive, while the other is yourself! Now, my fair lady, do you know who's talking to you?"

No response from the prostrate form—not so much as a movement.

He tauntingly continued,

"Perhaps you'll recognize me better by sight, the sense said to be most reliable. You shall have an opportunity of trying. But, first, let me take you into a clearer light than's afforded by these fire-flies."

Opening his arms, he threw them around the unresisting captive, and carried her out into the space silvered by the beams of the moon.

There he laid her down. Then, kneeling over her, as before, he tossed back the plumed fillet that encircled his crown, giving him the aspect of an Indian chief; though with the paint-smearing freshly washed from his face, he was less Indian-like now. Next he drew out a knife; cut open the serape by a transverse slit, and pulled the severed edge back above her forehead, leaving her eyes free.

The features thus uncovered, under the moonlight looked wan and woful. It was as the face of a beautiful nun, retired within the hood, making its beauty more piquant. But a nun whose glance shows her discontented with her lot, hating the cowl, detesting the cloister and the convent.

Truly dark and sad seemed Helen Armstrong's countenance so disclosed.

It became further shadowed by fear, when she saw Richard Darke above, holding in his hand a long-bladed knife, apparently about to plunge it into her breast!

Still she spoke not; and what cared he for her fears? They but gave him gladness.

In the same tone of triumph he continued:

"You know me now, don't you? Take a good survey of my face. I've removed the mask. Do I look anything like Richard Darke?"

The question suggested its own answer, though she made none. Nor did he, by thus interrogatively announcing himself, add aught to what she already knew: that Charles Clancy's assassin was bending above her.

Her agony was now no greater. It could not be. It had already reached a point holding her speechless; it still so held her.

Perhaps the three would pass. There was a scintillation in her eyes, seen under the moonlight, that promised a return of courage—the courage of despair. It might soon declare itself in speech.

Darke did not wait for it; nor much cared he what she should say. Every principle of honor, every throb of manhood, every spark of pity were long ago dead within him. He was already so steeped in crime, so committed to the partic-

ular deed he now intended, as to be beyond thought of retreat. In the cup of his scorned love was mingled the fell poison of vengeance.

He had once knelt before Helen Armstrong an humble suitor. He had thrown himself at her feet, and poured forth his soul in strong words of passionate entreaty. He had been denied, rejected, humiliated. He would not sue to her again. She was in his power, and he could command. It was his turn to humiliate her; and, in vile speech, he proceeded:

"So, fair girl! I hear that you've been greatly grieving for him that's gone. Like an eagle that's lost her mate, and refuses to pair again. That is the height of folly. Permit me to tell you so, and to say you needn't sorrow any longer. I am here—I, Richard Darke, to console you. I've such a great regard for you, I'm determined to make you happy. And you shall be. Once out upon the wild prairies, where I intend taking you, we shall have a wedding. That's the right sort of place for a bridal such

one made suddenly insensible by a *coup d'eclair*, or a stroke of paralysis.

For a moment, Darke himself thought she might be dead. He fully understood the situation. He knew that what he had said must have produced an effect fearfully painful. He meant that it should, though he did not intend it to kill her. Had it done so?

He was stooping lower to assure himself, when something caused him to rise suddenly erect, and stand like one just warned of danger!

For the moment Helen Armstrong seemed no more in his mind, or if so, only for him to have fear of her. He sprung from her side, as if her hands had been free, and she was pointing a dagger at his breast!

It was nothing of this that so affected him; but sounds that came from the other side of the oak. There was the tread of a startled horse, and along with it the pattering of feet—many feet, as of men making toward the spot. And rapidly, too, as though they were running!

tress more promptly responded to, or with greater determination to give relief.

For, it was Clancy who came rushing to her rescue—Charles Clancy, now knowing all. He knew it from what had fallen from the lips of Darke's confederate, captured on the other side of the tree. After seizing the supposed savage, and throttling him for a short time, Woodley had dragged him out into the moonlight, having some suspicion, as he said, "by the feel," that after all, the man might not be an Indian.

Once under the light, all uncertainty was at an end. Despite his painted face, the backwoodsman identified an old Mississippi acquaintance; while in turn he was himself identified.

At the mutual recognition both cried out, Woodley speaking first.

"Good Lord! you Bill Bosley! you playin' Injun! What's it for? I needn't ask. Some devil's work, such as ye war allers g'n to."

The response was in a different tone. It com-



A RUFFIAN TRIUMPHANT.

as ours should be. There the nuptial knot can be tied according to laws of our own making—canons that need neither church sanction nor the palaver of priests. I take it you understand me?"

The ruffian paused in his ribald speech. If he expected reply, he was disappointed. There was none—not a word.

Helen Armstrong, lying prostrate along the earth, appeared equally prostrated in soul. Enfolded in the Mexican blanket, that was close drawn around, her magnificent figure outlined underneath, she looked less like living woman than one of Pharaoh's daughters, taken from a sarcophagus, that had been shut upon her thousands of years ago!

After he had ceased speaking, she lay motionless as any mummy, and as silent. Even the beating of her heart could no longer be heard!

Had his speech killed her? The shock of that terrible, taunting menace? Its horror had caused her to close her eyes. She seemed as

He glided up to the trunk; and standing by one side, peeped cautiously around it.

He saw what filled him with fear. Several men coming on in full run toward the tree! They were crossing the moonlit space, and he could see that their faces were white.

This was enough. No men with white skins seen there could be other than enemies.

He waited to see no more; but bounding toward his horse, jerked the bridal rein from the bark. Then dragging the animal after him to where Helen Armstrong lay, he lifted her aloft, and flung her across the pommel of the saddle.

A bound carried him into it, behind her; and, grasping the reins, he was preparing to ride off.

But his captive was no longer silent, nor as if helpless. She, too, had heard sounds, that spoke of succor; and was now struggling to escape—calling for help that seemed close at hand!

She was heard. And never were cries of dis-

menced with a shriek of terror, ending in an appeal for mercy.

The words were:

"Sime Woodley! And Ned Heywood! Joe Harkness, too! Boys, you won't kill me, you won't? I ain't to blame in this bizness. You, Joe, know I only acted under the cap's orders—Jim Borlasse—him, and the lieutenant."

"Who?" cried Clancy, interrupting the explanation. "What lieutenant?"

"Him as has got Miss Helen Armstrong on t'other side the tree. Phil Quantrell, we call him; though Mr. Woodley will know him better and so will Ned Haywood, by the name of—"

Clancy stayed not to hear the name pronounced. Too well he knew what it would be. With the elastic leap of a lion, bounding upon prey, he sprung away from the spot, toward the trunk of the tree. In two seconds he had reached, and was making to go around it. But before he could clear the huge skirting pilasters, he heard Helen Armstrong calling "Help!"

It did not need this to hasten his footsteps. He was going fast as man might, or could.

On rounding the tree-trunk, he saw a horse with a man mounted on his back. And something on the saddle-bow, in front, this seemingly the form of a woman. It was one—it was Helen Armstrong. Though held by the rider, she was not at rest; but writhing in his arms, convulsively struggling, all the while shouting:

"Help! help!"

Clancy held his rifle in hand, cocked, and ready to be brought to the level. He could have shot down the horse; and so prevented his enemy's escape. He only delayed doing it from a fear that the fall of the animal might cause injury to her dear to him. Still would he have risked it, had there been no other chance to prevent her being carried off. But there was, and he saw it. Scared by the contest upon his back, the horse had commenced prancing over the ground, and refused to advance. His head had been set for the forest, and his rider was urging him into the moonlit space between. Instead, he reared back under the shadow of the tree.

With a bound Clancy was by his side, and seized the bridle-rein. Seeing which, Darke let go his hold of the captive, who slipped instantly from his arms. Helpless, she would have fallen heavily, but for Clancy's arms receiving, and letting her lightly down. Then, without waiting to say a word, he sprung to get his gun, dropped in the struggle. In the darkness he saw it; not; and giving up the search, he once more made toward the horse, intending to drag the rider from his saddle.

But Darke, now disembarassed, had got command of the reins; and going off at a gallop, shot across the open ground, soon disappearing into the timber beyond.

Woodley and Heywood, who had come on from the other side of the tree, stood with their rifles raised. Either by a bullet could have stopped the horseman's flight. But Clancy, standing before them, tossed up their barrels; as he did so exclaiming:

"Not for the world! Hold your fire, both! That life belongs to me."

Thus did Richard Darke once more escape the punishment due to two great crimes he had intended; the last, as the first, fortunately unaccomplished.

CHAPTER LXII.

MUTUAL EXPLANATIONS.

To paint the surprise of Helen Armstrong, on seeing that her lover still lived, is beyond the power of the pen. That he did was almost beyond her own power of belief.

No wonder she was for a time incredulous, thinking him dead. No report to the contrary had reached the Texan colonists; and she but shared the universal belief.

But he was living, breathing, by her side, in another moment standing before her, and with strong, though tender arms, enfolding her to his bosom. Face to face, under the moonlight, she saw his fine manly features, with the hue of health upon his cheeks, his eyes sparkling with excitement, and, as of yore, glancing with the light of love. Yet it was he, Charles Clancy, as her own eyes now declared, and her heart told her—he, the lord of that heart.

Equally difficult to depict her joy. It was like that of one, who, long lingering at the door of death, has health suddenly restored, with the prospect of a prolonged and happy life!

With arms entwined, the two stood, making renewal of vows plighted in the past, and now sealing them with kisses.

Then, after the rapturous exchange, explanations were vouchsafed, in hurried speech and such as suited the hour. Minor details must be left to a time more opportune.

Jessie, released from her bonds, had joined them, uniting her share of joy to that of the long parted lovers. Poor Jess! she had not much joy to give. It was her turn to be sad; for it was too likely, that at the moment her own lover might be lying cold and low. And their father, what of him?

Neither spoke the interrogatory, as neither could answer it. Each had it in her own heart; Helen's becoming again saddened, as she shaped conjectures about his fate.

Clancy sought to comfort the sisters, with but slight success. The knowledge was all on their side, and yet they knew but little. Only that they had been seized and carried off, as they at the time believed by Indians. They told him of Fernand and his treason. They could tell him no more. To them all the rest was a mystery; though not so much now, seeing that Richard Darke was one of the supposed savages.

Woodley, at this moment coming up, made matters clearer. He had been conferring with their prisoner, and from him got a pretty correct account of how things stood.

He did not impart his knowledge to the sisters; but, drawing Clancy aside, said:

"We must get out o' hyar 'ithout wastin' the shortest space o' time. This place ain't safe no-how."

Clancy started. Absorbed by sweeter thoughts, he had forgotten that there might be danger still impending over the spot.

"You're right, Woodley," he rejoined.

"Where do you propose going?"

"Straight on for the ole mishun. Fust let's restore these dear critters to father an' friends. But we mustn't take the dereck trail, that as leads 'cross the river, hyar."

"Why not?"

"Because, by goin' that way, we'd be likely as not to kum face to face wi' them, we've good reezun jess now ter shun. I s'pose the gurls hev been tellin' you that they war tuk by a party as looked like Injuns. Wal, that party air no other than Jim Borlasse an' his band o' brigants, painted savidge fashun. Bosley hez let out all, seein' ef he hadn't I'd 'a' split his thrapple for him. They sent him an' Dick Darke in charge o' the gurls, while the rest stayed to fetch the money from the mishun. They wanted only it an' the weemen. The fust they got eezy, and ef they kin clur the cash the same way, they don't mean killin'. So thet thar's a chance o' nob'dy, or not many o' the people bein' massa-creed. But come, Clancy; we hain't time to spek'late hyar, or Borlasse an' his beauties may be along. I've sent Jue an' Harkness to bring up the hosses. Heywood hez charge o' that skunk t'other side the tree. No use in all o' us goin' back to the camp an' takin' the two gurls thar. The trail we've got to foller now runs past this way; and we'd only be doublin' twice over it."

"But to reach the mission you must go by the ford below?"

"Not a bit o' it. We needn't cross hyar at all. Thar's a trail that leads up this side the river to another fordin'-place. It air above the ole mishun, an' will take us along ways about—nigh on twenty mile. But it will be safe; I shed think perfectly safe. Whariver them wolves be now prowlin', they ain't like to take the upper crossin', an' tharfor thar won't be no fear o' our droppin' inter thar ugly jaws. The lower crossin' hyar, though the deerecktest line, mout in the eend be the consarndest, crookedest track we ked travel, reezultin' in the leadin' us right inter a trap. S'pose we war to meet them brigants? Bosley says thar's 'bout twenty o' 'em. Ag'in that number we'd stand no chance, burdened as we now air. We'd go down afore 'em like ripe apples from a tree. An' knowin' Jim Borlasse as you an' I do, Charley, jess think o' the fate as 'ud be in store for them two young critters stannin' thar, lookin' sweet as pears, an' tender as persimons in fall time. They'd be ruined to a sartinty."

Clancy, listening the while, stood to listen no longer. The thought of their encountering Borlasse and his band—of Helen Armstrong being again at the mercy of such men—far more inhuman than savages—caused him to give quick assent to the hunter's proposal.

But while doing so, he added that which gave Simeon Woodley a surprise. He told the latter of his intention to stay behind—to take up the trail of Darke, and follow it till he should find him!

Woodley remonstrated; pointed out the danger of such a course; could not think of parting with him; said that if Clancy must stay, he should stay with him,—almost swore that he would.

He was silenced by a few words, spoken in stern determined tone.

"No, Woodley. You must go on to the mission, and take them with you. For myself, I must follow him—shall follow him, till he be overtaken. When that's done, one of us will cease to live. You need have no fear which. I won't give the coward a second chance to shoot me from behind—nor yet escape me."

"But why not let me stay wi' ye, an' go whar you air goin'? Or Ned Heywood?"

"You'll need Heywood to take care of them,"—Clancy pointed to the sisters,—"*also* to look after Bosley. Harkness cannot be depended upon. Therefore, you'll have your hands full enough. Besides, Sime, I've another reason; a matter of sentiment some could not, might not understand. Perhaps you can, and will."

"Tell it, an' let me try."

"Well; it is this. I feel that in this affair my manhood is called in question. A man must do something to prove himself worthy of the name; at least, one deed during his life. I have one before me; and it must be done by myself. I should not be satisfied to share it with another—not even with you, Woodley."

"Then ye prefar follerin' Dick Darke alone?"

"I do; only taking Jupiter and the dear old hound along. I shall need the dog to set me on the trail at starting, now, in the night. In daylight, you know, I can lift it for myself. Simeon Woodley, we waste time. Go! Do as I tell you. I want it—I wish it—I insist upon it!"

"All right, Charley Clancy. You shall be obeyed, howsoever I hate to leave ye. Before partin', gi'e us a grasp o' your han', and let Sime Woodley say, 'God take care o', and keep ye clear from the clutches o' the Divell!'"

The dialogue was brought to a termination, by Jupiter and Harkness, at that moment, coming up with the horses.

CHAPTER LXIII.

AGAIN TO PART!

THE light of joy that had so suddenly shone into the heart of Helen Armstrong, was, with equal abruptness, extinguished. He who gave, also took it away. After the dialogue just reported, Clancy, rejoining her, said:

"Dearest Helen! I hope you'll not feel grieved at what I am going to say—to do. I must leave you for a time."

"Leave me?" she exclaimed, with an air of bewilderment.

"Yes; I have to stay here. But you will go back to the mission. My brave comrades, Woodley and Heywood—both known to you—they will go with you. Accompanied by such an escort, you need have no fear. With their lives both, I know, will answer for the safety of yourself and sister."

She stood listening, her grand eyes still set in the same bewildering stare.

"Leave me!" she said, a second time—pronouncing the words as though she had not heard his explanation. Then adding: "Again! So soon!"

"I must. Helen, I regret it as much as you. I will not say more. But we have to part for a while—only for a while. It is inevitable."

"Why? Oh! why?" was the interrogatory, that leaped in agonized accent from her lips.

The two were again standing with arms entwined, faces close together, and lips almost touching.

As she spoke, she drew herself a little way back, though still retaining hold of his hands. And in this attitude she kept her eyes fixed upon his, anxiously awaiting the answer.

Returning her glance, he gave it.

"Helen Armstrong; you are to me the dearest object on earth. Without you I have no life, and should not care to live an hour longer. To say I love you, were but repeating an old tale. I have said it already—sworn it. You know that I love you, and surely that is enough? But there is another who claims a share in my affections—"

His speech was interrupted by a movement on the part of her listening. It was a start, quick, as if spasmodic. She turned pale, half withdrawing her hands from his. Her bosom rose and fell, as if stirred by some terrible emotion.

Clancy, perceiving it, though without clearly comprehending the cause, hastened to allay her agitation. He continued:

"That share, I should surely give to one gone away; one I shall never see more. Need I tell you it is my mother?"

Helen Armstrong, relieved, wished to conceal the thought that had been stinging her. With an effort to appear tranquil, she simply made response:

"I have heard of your mother's death."

"Say, rather, of her murder," rejoined Clancy, speaking sternly, and through set teeth.

"Yes," he continued, "my poor mother was murdered by him who has just ridden off. But he won't ride far before I overtake him. I've sworn upon her grave not to know rest till she be avenged; till his blood atone for hers. I've tracked him thus far; and shall continue tracking him to the end, Helen Armstrong! 'Tis for that I am now going to leave you. Let it be my excuse."

She would have protested, appealed; but Simeon Woodley was seen approaching. She had only time for one wild, half-distracted speech.

"You love your mother's memory more than you love me!"

It was rung from her agony. As soon as made she regretted it—perceiving its effect.

"Not that, Helen; not that," he said, in a tone half apologetic, half reproachful. "You must know it is not so. Reflect, that I have made an oath, solemn and sacred; sworn it over it a new-made grave. *It must be kept!*"

Their hands had nearly become disunited. Hers again closed upon his, with a grasp firmer than before, while she looked up at his face, and into his eyes, more relyingly than ever. In her glance there was the same love, but along with it admiration.

The selfishness of her own passion cowered before the sacredness of that inspiring him; cowered and passed away.

She said:

"Go—go! Seek the retribution you speak of. Perhaps it is right. You will come back to be true to me, as you have been to your mother. It not, I shall soon be dead."

"If not, you may know that I am dead. Only death can hinder my return. For a while, farewell!"

Again farewell! Oh! it was afflicting! Up to that moment Helen Armstrong had borne herself with the fortitude derived from a strong self-sustaining nature. On hearing that word—the last, the wildest of all—she could sustain herself no longer, but flinging herself on Clancy's breast, gave way to a torrent of tears.

"Be brave, Helen!" he said, kissing them from her cheeks. "Have no fear for me. I know my man, and the work cut out for me. He has got the better of me twice, but will not the third time. When we next come together

"It will be my turn to triumph, surely. Something tells it me, as in whisper. Perhaps the spirit of my mother! So keep up your courage, love! Go with Simeon Woodley, who will see you safe home. Once there, you can offer up a prayer for me, if you like. And one, too, for Richard Darke; for before two suns are set, his soul will have gone to its God."

These words were spoken not lightly, but in stern, solemn tone. They were the last before parting, their solemnity seeming a fit *finale* to the speeches that had passed before.

Though it was not this that put an end to the dialogue. But Simeon Woodley, who now interrupting it, urged the necessity of immediate departure from the place.

"A minute lost," he said, "and it may be too late."

Clancy was equally eager to be off, though in a different direction. For his purpose, time was also precious. He wanted to set upon the trail while it was still warm.

The horses were already on the ground, and

the dark thought returning, soon became fixed as before; and facing his companion, he said:

"Bring up my horse, Jupe; and you mount your mule. Now, to find Richard Darke; then to give him his death shot!"

CHAPTER LXIV.

PURSUED.

A MAN on horseback making his way through a wood. It is a tract of virgin forest, in which ax of settler has never sounded. And rarely traversed by ridden horse; still more rarely by pedestrian.

He now passing through it rides along no road—no trodden path—no trace of any kind. For all, he goes as rapidly, as the thick-standing tree-trunks and the tangle of underwood will allow him.

At the same time he shows caution, and on his face there is fear.

It is not of anything before, but evidently something behind. This can be told by the way he sits his saddle—at intervals slewing

from which heard, he urges on his horse in the opposite. From this, it is evident he does not design proceeding to the river's bank. He has late parted from it, and has no desire to go back again.

After a series of these short pauses and shoots forward, he at length arrives on the timber's edge. There appears before him an expanse of open plain. The moon, gleaming down upon it, shows it clothed with tall grass, which, stirred by the night breeze and silvered by the moonbeams, resembles the surface of a tropic sea alive with phosphorescent medusæ. Swarms of fireflies, playing among the spikes, and flitting hither and thither, make the resemblance complete.

The hastening horseman thinks not of these, nor even looks at them. The expression upon his face tells that he is not in a mood for contemplating nature. His eyes are fixed upon a dark line, discernible beyond the plain. It looks like the border of another tract of timber similar to that passed through. In reality it is



SOON TO PART.

all now mounted under Simeon Woodley's supervision. The backwoodsman took Jessie on the croup behind himself, while Heywood did the same with their prisoner. The horse of the latter was appropriated to Helen alone, while Harkness retained the roadster he had been all along riding.

In this order they moved off, leaving Clancy under the shadow of the oak, Jupiter standing by his side, and the hound crouching at his heels.

What thoughts were in his mind as he stood looking after! They were emotions strange and wild! Would he ever see Helen Armstrong again?

It was indeed doubtful; and as the doubt swept across his soul, he felt irresolute about his vow of vengeance, and half inclined to forego the dire determination.

But as the departing cavalcade entered among the trees, and the white drapery floating around the form of his sweet

himself round, and glancing apprehensively backward.

After each of these twistings, he again faces forward, and urges his animal on.

The moonbeams, here and there slanting down through breaks in the forest foliage, give light enough to guide him along his course; though he does not appear to be very sure of it. The only thing certain is, that he has fear of something behind, and is fleeing from it.

Now and then he makes stop, holds his horse in check, and listens. It is for the purpose of ascertaining whether he still heads in the same direction—a thing not so easily told in passing through a pathless forest.

Under the circumstances how can his ears avail him? They would not always, though now they do. He hears a sound, which he knows to be that of water in motion—the sough of a flowing stream.

He does not stay to listen to its monotone. Soon as hearing it, and noting the direction

the facade of a cliff, shutting in the opposite side of the valley. He knows it is this, and intends making for it. He only stays to scrutinise its profile, and take bearings for a point with which he has previous acquaintance.

This apparently determined, he sets his horse once more in motion, and rides off over the plain: not now in zigzags, or slowly, as when passing through the timber, but in a straight, tail-on-end gallop, fast as his animal can go.

An odd sort of horseman, looking at him in the moonlight! He would appear equally singular, seen by the light of day. He wears the costume of a Comanche Indian; and his hands, wrists, arms—so far as seen—have the correct red-skin color. Not so his face, which is white; under the moon showing pallid, like that of a chimney-sweep washed for his Sunday's stroll.

There is no one to smile at these incongruities; no one to take note of them; and the fleeing horseman gallops on over the plain without any interruption.

Once under the shadow of the cliff, he pulls up; and, seated in his saddle, casts a glance along its face.

A spot of triangular shape, with apex inverted, darker than the adjacent rock, shows a break in the escarpment. It is the embouchure of a ravine, whose bottom is the bed of an intermittent stream, running only when there is rain. It is now dry; and its channel gives a practicable path to a plain above, the surface of which is on the same level with the crest of the cliff—the latter being but its termination.

Toward this black embrasure the horseman heads, as if he had been there before. In like fearless manner he enters within its grim jaws, and rides on up the slope, under the shadow of cliffs overhanging right and left.

It cost him a climb of some twenty minutes; after which he again emerges into moonlight upon the edge of the upper plain.

Here he once more makes halt, and looks back. His view is over the river bottom, with a continuous line of timber seen afar off, and nearer some isolated groves, with open expanses between. It is the valley of the San Sabá.

And he, thus hastily retreating out of it, is Richard Darke.

Not strange his haste. For on the river's edge was seen a man he has reason to regard as his Nemesis. While taunting his captive under the tree, he heard a name that sent the blood with a cold shiver through his veins—the name Simeon Woodley. Simeon Woodley after him at Natogdoches! Simeon Woodley after him at Natchez! And now again in Texas, Simeon Woodley still pursuing him!

On reaching the table-land he feels for the time safe. Over it is the way he intends taking to reach a place of refuge—the rendezvous of the robber band. He has a view of the valley below, for long way lit up with a clear moonlight, and no one is seen there.

After regarding it for a while, he dismounts; as he does so muttering:

"There can be no good in my going any further now. I may as well stay here till the rest arrive. They can't be much longer, unless they've had a fight to detain them. Which I don't think at all likely, after what the half-blood told us. In any case some of them must soon come up. Great God! To think of Sime Woodley being here! And after me, sure, for the killing of Charley Clancy! Harkness, too, with him! He's met my old jailer somewhere on the way, and brought him back to help them in finding me. What the devil can it all mean? Are the Fates combining against me?"

"Several others with Woodley. One so like Clancy himself, the fellow that caught hold of my horse, I could have sworn it was he, if I hadn't been sure of having settled him. If ever gun bullet gave a *death shot*, mine did. The last breath was out of his body before I left him.

"Sure, he's dead. But sure, Sime Woodley isn't. D—n this ugly brute of a backwoodsman! He appears to have been created for the especial purpose of persecuting me!

"And she in my power, to let her so slackly escape! I may never have such a chance again. She'll get safe home again, not only to curse, but make mock of me. What a simpleton I was to let her go alive! I should have driven my knife into her. Why did I not do it? Agh!"

As he gives out the exclamation his eyes are turned toward the valley, from which he has just retreated. There is blackness on his brow, and chagrin in his glance. It is a look dark and demoniac; such as Satan may have cast back at the moment of being expelled from Paradise.

A short pause, and then the soliloquy is continued.

"No good my grieving about it now. Regrets won't get her back. Well; there may be another chance, in spite of Sime Woodley and all of them. If I live there shall be, though it cost all a lifetime to bring it about."

Another pause, spent in apparent reflection. Again the soliloquy:

"No; I won't go further till the boys come up. 'Tisn't at all likely Woodley will follow me on here. He and his party appeared to be afoot. I saw no horses. They might have them near, for all that. But they can't tell which way I took through the timber, and couldn't track me till after daylight anyhow. Before then Borlase is pretty certain to be along. Just possible he may come across Woodley and his lot. They're sure to make for the mission, and sure to take the road up the other side. There's a good chance of their being met at the crossing, unless that begging fool Bosley has let all out. Maybe they've killed him on the spot! I didn't hear the end of it, and hope they have.

"I am wrong to stand so conspicuously. Sime Woodley has been in these parts before, and will remember this pass. He *might* take it into his head to come straight on—thinking I'd make for it. If so, and he should get here first, I'd be in an ugly fix. I'll strike for cover, and lie up a bit. Where's the best hiding-place?"

He glances around. His eye falls upon a dark

mass about a quarter of a mile off, and some three hundred yards out from the cliff's edge.

It is a grove of black-jack oak; the trees, though small, standing thick, branched to the roots, and unbrageous.

"The very place! I can there see all that comes up the pass, and will know our fellows by this clear moonlight. It'll do."

Springing back into the saddle, he again sets his horse in motion, and rides on toward the grove.

On reaching it he dismounts, and leads his animal in among the trees.

At a short distance from the grove's edge there is a glade. In this he makes stop; and secures his horse, by knotting the bridle round a branch.

There is a water-gourd hanging over the horn of his saddle, which he lifts off. It is large—capable of containing a half-gallon. It is three parts full, not of water, but whisky. The fourth part he has drunk during the day; the larger portion of it while carrying off the captives. He then drank to give him courage, and add to the ecstasy of his triumph. He now carries the canteen to his lips, with the hope of tempering his chagrin. He drinks also, because he has of late become addicted to it.

After taking a long and strong pull at the gourd, he goes back to the place where he had made entry among the black-jacks. There standing in shadow, he watches for the coming of his confederates.

He keeps his eyes upon the point, where the gorge goes down to the river valley. They could ascend it without his seeing them, but not pass on over the upper plain. Horse, or man, crossing there would show conspicuously.

They must arrive soon, else he will not see them. His sight is rapidly becoming obscured, and the equilibrium of his body endangered, by raising the gourd too often to his lips, and there holding it too long. Chagrin, impatience, the increasing passion for drink, prompt him to this.

As the vessel grows lighter, so does his head. This only at first. Afterward the head becomes heavy; while his limbs refuse longer to support the weight of his body.

At length, with an indistinct perception of being unable to keep his feet, and a belief he might be better in a horizontal attitude, he staggers back to where he has tied his horse, reels, and falls heavily to the earth.

In ten seconds after, he is asleep.

If Jim Borlase had come along and seen him just then, he would have said:

"Look at that fool, Phil Quantrell—he's drunk."

CHAPTER LXV.

PURSUERS.

Two men making their way through a wood—one of them on horseback, the other bestriding a mule.

It is the same tract of timber through which Richard Darke has just been retreating.

They have a dog along with them—a large deer-hound; not pure bred, but with a cross of terrier and blood.

The animal with this triple commixture of race, is in the advance—with nose to the ground, taking up a trail. A strap around its neck, with a cord attached—the last held in the hand of the horseman—hinders it from going too fast, or getting too far ahead. Another strap—buckled around its jaws, keeping them closed—a muzzle, in short. This is to prevent the creature giving tongue.

From these precautions, it is evident that the men riding after have some reason for proceeding in silence.

What game can they be stalking in such cautious manner? The Texan hunter does not so track deer, bear, or buffalo. What can be their intended quarry?

We may learn by listening to the speech passing between them, as by knowing who they are. He on the horse is a white—the mule-rider a mulatto. They are Charles Clancy and Jupiter.

The former speaks first.

"He's on the trail now, Jupe. He scents the assassin. I can tell by the way he leads upon the leash."

"All right, Masser Charles. Give him plenty of head. Guess we can keep up with him."

Both talk in a low tone—almost a whisper.

They are silent again; Clancy giving all his attention to the hound.

It has now evidently struck a trail, with scent quite fresh. The quick vibration of its tail, with a spasmodic action of the body, tells this. A sound is also heard coming from between the closed jaws—a sound of stifled baying. But for the confining muzzle, it would be loud enough to wake the forest echoes far around.

So proceeding, the trackers make but slow progress. They are more than an hour getting across the belt of timber, which they might have passed through in less than half the time.

At length, however, they arrive upon its edge, and see before them an open plain, grass-grown, and silvered by a brightly shining moon.

They stop a moment, and cast their eyes across it, as if they expected to perceive some-

thing ahead. Their speech, again exchanged, tells what that something is.

As before, the white man speaks first.

"He's come out at this place, and is gone across the open bottom, straight for yonder bluff. Can't you see a line through the grass, where it's been trampled down?"

"Yes, Masser Charles, I see it; plain as can be."

"Well, it's the track of Dick Darke's horse. Beyond this he has put the animal to speed—gone at a gallop, as the stretch shows. Let him go that way, or any other he likes. He thinks himself cunning, and he had need be. Now I'm upon his trail, he'll be clever if he can escape me. You know, Jupe, I'm not cruel. I don't think I ever did a harsh thing in my life, nor hurt to any one."

"I'm sure you never did, masser."

"Well, my dealing with this man must be an exception; for, sure as I live, I intend killing him, or he shall kill me."

"He deserve die, if ever bad man did."

"I've sworn he shall—you know when and where—sworn to track him to the death, as I'm now doing. The spirit of my poor mother—sweet saint sent to an untimely grave—seems now speaking into my ear. It tells me to keep my oath. Let us on!"

They ride out upon the moonlit plain, and on over it. The dog no longer guides them. His nose is not needed. The slot left by the galloping horse is conspicuous. They can see it, themselves going in a gallop.

Half an hour at this rapid pace, and they are again under shadow. It is the shadow of the bluff; so dark that the hoof-marks of the retreating horsemen can no longer be made out.

For a time they are stayed, while once more leashing the hound, and setting it upon the trail.

The animal lifts the scent with renewed spirit, and, keeping in advance, conducts them to an opening in the wall of rock. It is the entrance to the gorge going upward. They can perceive a well-marked path, upon which are the tracks of horses, apparently hundreds of them.

Clancy dismounts to examine them. He takes note, that they are tracks of unshod horses; though there are some with the iron on. He perceives that they are nearly fresh, among others of older date. Those recently made have the convexity of the hoof turned toward the valley. Whoever rode these horses, came down the gorge, going on for the river. He had no doubt of their being the same horses, whose tracks were observed close to the crossing, and which he now knows to have been made by the party of prairie pirates.

They must have come down the gorge, going on to the mission, and would return the same way. If so, there could be danger in an encounter with them—perhaps death at their hands.

The thought should deter him from proceeding further in that direction.

But it does not. He is urged on by his oath—by his determination at all cost to keep it. He fancies Darke cannot be far ahead; and trusts to overtaking, and settling scores with him, before his confederates can come up.

Reflecting thus, he enters the ravine, and commences ascending. Jupiter follows; the hound, again loose, crawling close after.

The ascent is steep; the path otherwise difficult. It takes them nigh half an hour to reach the summit of the pass.

Once there, they perceive that a different light is around them. The moon has gone down, her white, silvery beams, replaced by a gloaming of gray. There are streaks of bluish color, rose tinted, along the horizon's edge. That is the dawn. Day is just breaking.

At first Clancy is gratified by a sight oft gladdening to hearts. Daylight will assist him in his design.

He soon thinks otherwise. Sweeping his eye over the upland plain, he sees that it is treeless. A thin skirting of timber runs along the bluff edge; but elsewhere all is open, except a solitary grove of black-jacks standing at some distance off.

The rendezvous of the robbers would not be there; but more likely beyond the treeless tract. Noting that a trail leads straight outward, he is sure of this, and almost sure that Darke has gone that way. To follow in full daylight over the open plain, would not only defeat all chance of approaching the pursued man, but expose himself to the danger of being captured by his confederates coming from behind. On the smooth wide expanse they would see him full five miles off; and once seen in such a situation he would not be able to escape them. For himself he might, and could. Mounted on a magnificent horse, he knew this; for he was confident there was no ridden steed in all Texas could overtake him.

But by his side was a mule, with a man on its back, he would not forsake; no, not for the saving of his life. And the slow pace of the hybrid—therein lay the danger.

Thus reflecting, Clancy looks across the plain, then at Jupiter, saying:

"I fear, Jupe, we've been going too fast, and perhaps too far. I had hoped to find him somewhere in the river bottom. Up here things don't look nice. Those scoundrels will be coming on

behind us; and, if so, I needn't tell you we'll be in trouble. What do you think we'd best do?"

"Well, Masser Charles, that's not for me to say. I know nothin' 'bout these Texas prairies. If 'twas in a 'lassissip' swamp, I might give good advice. Hyar I'se all in a quandary."

Clancy stands reflecting, Jupe doing the same.

This time the mulatto speaks first.

"Masser Charles; s'pose we lie hid durin' the day, an' keep on after him at night? The ole dog sure take up the scent for good twenty-four hours to come. There's a big bunch of trees standin' out yonder. That'll give us a hiding place; an' if 't'other robbers go past this way, we sure see 'em."

"But if they go past, it will be all over. I could have little hope of finding him alone. Along with them he would—"

Clancy speaks as if in soliloquy.

Abruptly breaking off, and changing tone, he addresses himself to Jupiter.

"No, Jupe; we must go on now. I'll take the risk if you're not afraid to follow me."

"Masser Charles, I ain't 'fraid. I follow you anywhere—to death if you need me die."

"Thanks, my faithful fellow! We won't talk of death till we've got into company with Dick Darke."

The sound is from behind; and looking back he sees that which may well make him afraid. A troop of horsemen are ascending the gorge, riding in single file. On reaching the head of the pass, they halt, falling in to a sort of line by *echelon*, their heads just showing above the crest of the escarpment. Such heads, and such faces. The former feather-tufted, the latter besmeared with paint! Painted fantastically, with devices of various kinds—all intended to inspire dread—among them the death's heads and cross-bones! Exposed only to the shoulders, they look more like demons than men—demons of the theater, about to rise out of a trap, as yet only their heads appearing above the timber of the stage!

Equally like these, as their bodies become exposed, as their horses again get in motion and straining up the last declivity of the *talus*, step out on the level plain.

One after another they reach it, the foremost files halting as the rearmost ride up; till the whole troop is at length disclosed to view, down to the hoofs of their horses.

Seen from a short distance off, an ordinary spectator would, at sight, have pronounced it a party of Comanches upon a plundering expedition. Returning from it; since their saddles, both pommel and cantel, appear laden with spoils.

After all, what might himself expect? True, the men in sight were robbers, but might not be red-handed murderers. Their attack upon the new settlement was but a lot of burglary, its aim being Dupre's great treasure, too much talked about, to escape the cupidity of such freebooters as they. While the carrying away the Armstrong girls, was a special act at the instigation of Dick Darke, Borlase being also interested in the affair.

All this Clancy knew from the confession of Bosley, made at the moment of his being taken.

Beyond, what had he, Clancy, to fear? Rough treatment, perhaps, no doubt of that—but not certain death. True, there was the old grudge owing him by Borlase, about the horse-theft at Nacogdoches, and the flogging that followed. And there was also the unsettled score between him and Darke. For the castigation received, Borlase might not be so revengeful, as to demand his life; and Darke under the impression he had taken it already, would show with ill grace claiming it a second time. His confederates, however vile, would scarce back him up in a vengeance like that. Besides, Darke was not now upon the ground, and there was no need for them to know why he, Clancy, was there. It was not necessary for him to tell them he was at that moment in the act of tracking up their comrade, with the intention of slaying him soon as found.



JOY SPARKLED IN HIS EYES—JOY THAT ROSE DIRECT FROM HIS HEART—AS HE SAW—JUPITER!

"When you shall see it, one way or the other. Hal! what does yonder? A drove of mustangs! They are making this way."

With his eyes watching the wild horses, he ceases speech.

They come on in full career—along a line parallel to the trend of the cliff, though at some distance from its edge. Neighing, snorting, with tossed manes, and streaming tails, they tear past; and are soon far off on the opposite side.

Clancy and his companion, holding their animals in check, wait till the wild horses are well out of the way. They then spur outward upon the plain, keeping along the trail of the prairie pirates.

Soon they have to stop, looking it. The hoof marks of the mustangs have obliterated it.

As these have gone in a transverse direction, Clancy rides across them, and looks for sign on the other side.

There he finds a firm turf, with a sward so close and crisp that even the hard hoof of a horse does not indent it. He sees no trail—no trace of one. He is at fault.

Once more he unleashes his hound, sets it to seeking, and sits in his saddle to watch.

But before scent is caught, a sound reaches his ears, causing him to turn his eyes in a different direction.

Clancy knows better. He knows they are not Comanches, though returning spoils laden from a foray. He knows they are not Indians of any kind; but white men in Indian garb and guise—white savages far more to be feared than red ones—the desperadoes of southwestern Texas, whose chief is the notorious Jim Borlase.

CHAPTER IX. TAKEN PRISONER.

"WHAT a fool I've been!" The exclamatory phrase was Charles Clancy's; made in muttered tone, as he caught sight of the prairie pirates.

His next speeches were interrogative: "What's to be done now? Gallop off and keep clear of them? Or stay till they come up?"

The splendid steed he bestrode gave him confidence he could do the former. But while cogitating, his eyes fell upon that which at once differently determined him—Jupiter's make. Mounted as the mulatto was, in a straight tall on end chair, there would be no chance for him to escape. They would surely capture, as surely enslave, and treat him with brutality, perhaps inhumanity.

Thus reflecting, Clancy said to himself: "Come what come may, I cannot, will not, desert him."

These reflections that take time to tell of, flitted across the brain of Charles Clancy, quick as so many flashes of lightning.

And after they had passed, and he was still undecided how to act, he saw himself surrounded by horsemen, at the same time hearing the words:

"Surrender, or die!"

Looking at the circle of faces, his heart might well have failed him. They were savage as ever seen on a Texan prairie, and ten times uglier. For their attempt to counterfeit the physiognomy of the red man was a failure—a travesty of the most ludicrous kind. The beetle brows, heavy hanging jowls, and pug noses, under the war paint, looked more comic than tragical.

The king in a Christmas pantomime, or the heroes of a country town fair, could not have been more ridiculously unreal; and seeing them from a safe window, one would not easily have resisted yielding to loud laughter.

Charles Clancy, viewing them as he did, saw nothing to excite this, or in any way make him mindful. But much to put him in the opposite mood. For in all their faces he read an expression of dire hostility—one in particular with eyes looking vengeance, and lips that seemed preparing to speak his death sentence!

And yet, not till after the robbers had closed around him, did any of them know who he was. Then their leader recognized him.

At the sight, Borlasse—for it was he—started in his saddle, appearing profoundly surprised.

He was so; and no wonder. For he, too, thought Clancy dead. It was the belief of everybody at the time he left Natchitoches. He had heard nothing of the man since, only from Darke, who had imparted some particulars of his affair with Clancy. False ones; for he maintained having killed his antagonist in fair fight; which Borlasse did not believe. But he had quite satisfied the latter about Clancy's death, saying he had seen him dead. False, too; though Darke himself did not know it.

Borlasse had not stood in need of such assurance. The newspaper account had made the fact known to him; while Darke, by fleeing from the place and joining his own band, gave confirmation of it.

After all, it was not a fact. Here was Clancy before him—Charles Clancy—still living! What did it mean?

And where was Phil Quantrell? This was another question now puzzling the prairie pirates, and had been since they came across the San Saba. At the crossing they had expected to overtake their two comrades, sent ahead in charge of the captive girls. Only some of them had gone under the live oak, and there observed tracks, which they supposed to have been made by the horses of Quantrell and Bosley.

Having no suspicion of what had occurred, they did not particularly examine them; and they saw nothing else there to detain them. Loaded with their precious plunder, they were anxious to transport it to a safe place of deposit. For this reason they had made but a brief pause at the crossing-place; only looking under the live-oak, and then leaving it. They supposed that Quantrell and Bosley, chafing at the delay—perhaps fearing pursuit—had hastened forward with the women, and would be found at the rendezvous.

Borlasse himself yet entertained some doubt about this. He could not understand Quantrell having gone on without waiting for the rest to come up. Much less why Bosley, to whom he had given definite orders, should have disobeyed them.

Still, Quantrell, who was a sort of lieutenant of the band, might have influenced the other to depart from this plan.

The unexpected presence of Clancy put a different face on the affair. It seemed to connect itself with Darke's disappearance; though in what way, and whether the latter had gone, was as much a mystery as ever.

Only for Borlasse himself had it a significance. His men had no acquaintance with Clancy; had never seen him before; and only heard of him as a man who had been murdered in the State of Mississippi. They had no thought of the murdered man, and him now before them being one and the same. How could they? Some young planter, they supposed the latter to be; one of the San Saba colonists, who had come out on a hunt, attended by his mulatto servant. This was their conjecture.

Borlasse knew better, but said nothing. Indeed, he was for a time rendered speechless by sheer surprise. Then perplexity kept him silent, his thoughts concentrated in an attempt to solve the double enigma.

The murdered man was alive, before him! While his murderer, who should have been there, was missing!

"What the mischief could it mean?"

This interrogatory was only addressed to himself, and in a tone not loud enough for any of his comrades to hear it; much less Clancy. Neither by word nor deed did he make himself known to his new-made prisoner. Under his disguise he fancied he was yet unrecognized. It was neither the time nor place for declaring his identity.

Only for a short while did he show hesitation. Then, as if some scheme had come into his thoughts, he pointed toward the prisoners, saying in a muttered tone to his men:

"Bring 'em along, boys! An' let's ride quick. 'Twon't do to be lollin' about here."

The others knew this as well as he. It was now broad daylight, and there might be pursuers upon their trail. They must go where these could not follow them.

"Take their weapons from them," continued the chief. "They won't want them any longer."

Several of the robbers closed around Clancy, intending to disarm him.

He now saw the mistake he had made, and bitterly repented it.

He treat in time might have saved him. The speed of his horse would have done it. Jupiter would have been taken, but what of that? The mulatto, as himself, was now a prisoner; and the companionship was not likely to benefit either. Why had he not galloped off?

Was it yet too late?

He put the question to himself; as he did so casting a quick glance at the horsemen around, looking for a break in their ranks.

No chance of escape. Stern looks, threatening gestures, guns grasped ready to be raised, pistols pointed, their muzzles bearing upon him. He would be shot down ruthlessly. His choice lay between instant death and submission. The death of a dog, too!

He submitted.

But not without protest in angry speech, Jupiter joining. Why were they thus made prisoners? And by what right?

It was of no avail. They might as well have talked to the stones. From these they would have been as likely to get a hearing or compassion. The only answer vouchsafed was a pistol pointed at the head of each, coupled with curses and threats; the latter telling them, if they did not go quietly along, they would be shot out of their saddles. Such was the brutal menace emphatically made, and evidently intended to be carried out.

There was no alternative but surrender.

Both were instantly disarmed. The robbers stripped them of everything, permitting them to stay in their saddles; where, in a trice, they were secured by a lashing of lariats.

One who had remained on the cliff's edge, as a rear-guard vedette, now rode up, and reported "All right behind."

Then the band moved off, Borlasse at its head; the prisoners, guarded by a double file, brought along in the rear.

CHAPTER X.

THE PRAIRIE STOCKS.

CLANCY had no choice, but keep on with his captors. He rode sullen and silent, chafing like a jungle tiger just captured and encaged.

As the moments passed, more than ever was he mad, at having permitted himself to be so easily ensnared—caught without making an effort to escape. And now

more than ever had he reason to dread the result. For although Borlasse simulated not to know him, it was surely but pretense. Impossible that the man he had been instrumental in getting punished—whipped at the post—should have lost remembrance of either him or the act, occurring, as it did, but six months before.

Beyond doubt, the robber chief must have recognized him, and would in due time declare it.

Then there was Darke, still at large, and certain soon to make appearance on the scene. He would rejoin his fellow robbers at the rendezvous, to which place they were now proceeding.

Darke and Borlasse together, and he, Clancy in their power! The former foiled twice, cheated of the victim he intended killing, and the sweetheart he designed carrying off! While the latter—

No use reflecting further. Clancy felt this; feeling, also, that a dread fate was before him. No wonder the thought made him sullen; and he was silent, because no one was near with whom he might hold converse. The robbers had separated him from his faithful follower, who, still mounted on the mule, rode at a distance behind.

Through the ranks of the ribald band, bucks-kinned and blanketed, now and then spreading into a ruck, he could see Borlasse at their head. Over six feet in stature, striding a large horse, he was sufficiently conspicuous.

Their road was across the open plain, and they appeared to be guiding themselves by a tree that stood solitary in its center, eight or ten miles off. It was upon the crest of a ridge that rose over the ordinary level, with an acclivity scarce perceptible.

Before reaching the tree, Borlasse spurred some hundred paces in advance, three or four of his fellows along with him. Riding with their heads together, they appeared to hold consultation.

About what they alone could know; but Clancy could easily guess that it concerned himself. He was sure of it, from seeing them turn round at intervals, and regard him with interested glances. They were sinister, too, foretelling trouble in store for him.

Borlasse appeared to be suggesting some plan for the disposal of his prisoners; and this in reality was he doing.

Neither knew what it was, till the cavalcade came alongside the tree. And then they only learned that they were to be separated. The main body of the brigands were ordered to continue on, taking the mulatto along with them; while the chief, with his escort, turned off at right angles along the combing of the ridge, Clancy's guards conducting him after.

For a mile or more they traveled in the new direction. Then the robber chief halted—the others doing the same—and waited for the prisoner and his guards to get up.

Then the men around Borlasse dismounted, and entered upon a task seemingly eccentric. At the same time it was suggestive of the most serious design; since it looked like the digging of a grave!

Not in the ordinary way, with spades. Spears and bowie knives were the implements employed.

Nor was it the shape usually designed for interment. Instead of an oblong rectangle, some seven feet in length, they were hollowing out a circular hole less than two in diameter.

At this they worked diligently downward; first with knives carving out the surface turf; then with spear blades, slicing the firmer sub-stratum of earth, and flinging out the fragments.

They continued their excavation, until they had sunk a cylindrical shaft, about five feet deep, with a diameter of some twenty inches. Then they desisted, standing silent around the cavity thus "crowded."

Borlasse, still seated in his saddle, broke the silence. Riding close up to his prisoner, and pushing the plumed bonnet back from his brow, he asked:

"Don't ye remember me, Charley Clancy?"

"I remember you," was the reply, spoken in a calm voice.

Borlasse gave a start. He had not been prepared for such answer as this. His disguise had not served him. But no matter now, nor was it much before. He had only been keeping up his *incognito* to indulge a whim—to have the fiendish pleasure of a surprise.

"Oh! ye do remember me, then?"

"Well," was Clancy's rejoinder, pronounced with as much sang-froid as if the question had been put by some former and not unfriendly acquaintance.

"Indeed! Maybe you'll say too well, by-an'-by. All right. It shows ye don't forget your old friends; an' besides, it saves a world of explanation. Well, then, since your memory's so good, you can also recall that little circumstance at Nacogdoches?"

This time there was no answer.

"I mean where ye got me tied two days to a post, and whipped into the bargain. You don't forget that, do ye?"

Still no response.

"Silence gives consent. I see ye remember the whole business. An' now I'm goin' to show you how I fix a fellow that's put me in a fix. Out here we've got a plan ten times better 'n any tying posts. You shall be confined so's thar won't be any chance o' wrigglin' about, an' havin' the cords cut inter yer skin. Ye won't be able to scratch your head if it itches. Now, boys! show him the way we punish our enemies on the plains. Put him in the prairie stocks!"

He thus threatened knew it would be no use protesting. In the face of the brute before him there was visible concentrated revenge—malice without mercy. As well might he have made appeal to an infuriated bull with its horns goring his breast.

He said nothing; but, silent as a savage, stoically awaited his fate.

This only excited the ire of the ruffian, who, losing temper, cried out:

"D—n you! I'll take the starch out of you. Now, boys! In him up! Bury him up to the neck!"

Quick as the order passed from the lips of their chief, several of the robbers stepped up to Clancy, released him from the stirrup fastenings, dragged him down from the saddle, and off toward the cavity prepared for his reception.

The hound sprang at them, making an effort to rescue its master. They would have killed it, but one cried out:

"No! let the darned dog alone! He'll be of use to us."

The trailing leash was taken hold of, and made fast to the horn of a saddle.

In ten seconds after, Clancy was in the earth up to his neck; and in as many minutes, the returned soil was trodden firmly around, so that only his head showed above the surface.

"Now!" cried Borlasse in triumph. "Stay there, Mr. Charley Clancy! Stay till the buzzards come peckin' at your skull, an' the worms go crawlin' through your flesh! Ha! ha! ha!"

As the peal of devilish laughter passed from his lips, it was taken up and chorused by his comrades, inhuman as himself.

For some time the bandits stayed upon the ground; their chief amusing them by continuing to taunt the unfortunate man, saying everything he could think of likely to give him pain.

Clancy bore it as he best could; never once more opening his mouth. He knew that words would be wasted, and the most piteous appeal received with pitiless mocking.

Having satisfied his spite, even to a surfeit of vengeance, the robber captain prepared to leave the spot. His men were impatient to be gone; thinking of the treasure intrusted to their associates, and looking forward to its fair distribution.

Borlasse was himself impatient, though from a different inspiration. He was thinking of the more precious treasure confided to Quantrell and Bosley.

Therefore, he at length gave the order for remounting and moving on. But not until he had bent down over Clancy's head, and with lips close to his ear, hissed out in a tone of fiendish malignity:

"It may comfort you to know, that Dick Darke's got your girl; by this time has her in his arms!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE SCOUTING PARTY.

WHILE, on the upper plain, Clancy was being put in what Borlasse facetiously termed the "prairie stocks," below, in the San Saba bottom, other men were moving. It was the party of scouts, under Dupre, sent forward to take up the trail of the supposed savages. With Hawkins and Tucker guiding, it reached the lower crossing of the river, not much before noon.

They might have got there sooner, but for certain precautions necessary to be observed. There were less than a dozen of them, while the savages, from all that could be gathered, must be five or six times this number. They still believed the burglars to have been Indians; drawing deduction, also, from what they had done, that booty, not scalps, had been their object. Their having carried off Colonel Armstrong's two daughters—and only these—showed as if this were less a design than accidental, from the girls chancing to be in the garden, and so falling in their way.

Dupre hoped it was so; but when he thought of his traitorous servant, Fernand, and some slight thing Jessie Armstrong had said to him about the behavior of the half-blood, a chilling fear crept into his heart, with a presentiment that it might be even worse.

Maddened by this, he would have hastened forward, in reckless gallop after the ravagers, but for Hawkins, who with difficulty kept him in check. The hunter knew that their only hope of recovering the captives lay in strategy rather than speed. For the latter, it was too late now.

On reaching the ford, they discovered certain signs that the savages had repassed the river. On its opposite side, after they had ridden over, they saw the hoof-prints of their horses, still wet with the water carried out of the stream.

Hawkins and Tucker easily identified them as the tracks of the same horses they had seen the evening before, with Indians on their backs.

The savages were likely to return along the trail by which they had traversed the river bottom; and the two hunters concluded they had gone on to the upper plain through the gorge they themselves had ascended in hopes of encountering buffaloes.

As this was what the scouts had ridden forward to determine, they did not think of now proceeding further. The end aimed at had been accomplished, and it only remained to return to the mission, and bring on the pursuing party as speedily as possible. It would by this time be organized, and ready for an effectual, if need be, a prolonged campaign.

It was now morning. Daylight was over the valley; and to attempt crossing toward the bluffs would bring them under the eyes of the Indians, who would be just about making their way up the gorge. Or if up it, and they had gone on over the plain, they would be sure to leave some one at the summit of the pass—perhaps a strong guard—to cover their retreat.

It would be imprudent to follow them further—sheer folly, indeed. The scouts saw this; and, without going beyond the timber edge, they turned to recross the ford, and ride back with all speed to the mission.

Before arriving at the river, they observed something that caused them to deviate from this design. It was a path leading at right angles out of the main ford-road, a narrow trace resembling a deer-track. On scrutinizing it, they saw horse-tracks that showed iron on. These were clearly the tracks of American horses—not mustangs. There were four sets so furnished; and among them the oblong elliptical hoof-mark of a mule. Whoever rode these animals must have been upon the main trail, before the Indians passed back over it; since the shod tracks were obliterated by the trampling of the more numerous naked hoofs.

What could it mean? Had a party of white men passed the place, going in a transverse course to that taken by the Indians? And who could have been riding a mule?

Hawkins could tell, that this had been under a saddle, and not a pack.

The scouts went back along the trail of the shod horses, to see whence they had come, and whether they belonged to the burglars.

They had not far to go before getting satisfied on this head. A camp fire, still smoldering; fragments of food around it, where men had eaten supper; among them some chips of biscuit, with which the red ants were already making free—transporting them to their subterranean cells.

Indians do not eat biscuit, because they have it not. The faces of the men who bivouacked by that smoldering fire must have shown white in its blaze!

There were other signs, though not so distinctive of race. The long grass pressed down, where men had lain as in sleep. Near by the branches of some trees with the bark chafed, where ropes had been knotted around them. Underneath, the ground dented by the stamping of the iron-shod horses.

The trackers proceeded some way beyond the camp ground. They found the trace where the four horsemen had approached it; coming up to the river by the same route as that, a few days before, traversed by Colonel Armstrong's wagon-train. They had not gone quite as far up as the crossing-place; but before reaching it had turned short off toward the river's

Lank, and passed the night where the camp signs were seen.

And, again, the scouts could distinguish the tracks of four horses, all shod, all American, with those of a mule, also American—the hybrid of the States leaving a hoof-print easily distinguishable from that of its Mexican congener.

In addition, they saw the tracks of a dog—a large dog—evidently in companionship with a party of horsemen.

Satisfied that these must have come up the river bottom, and were in no way connected with the Indians, Dupre and his party returned to the ford road; and, riding along this, entered the trace on its opposite side.

It brought them under the great oak, and in sight of "sign," which caused them to pull up, dismount, and give it their keenest scrutiny.

They had not been long so engaged, when one who had entered the palmetto-bushes uttered an exclamation that attracted the rest toward him. It was accompanied by the words,

"Boys! here's something queer! Darned if it ain't no scalp o' an Indian!"

The speaker held before their eyes something that resembled a wig; the hair black, long, and coarse, as if taken from the mane or tail of a horse. And so had it been; and also was it a wig, that worn by Bosley, shaken from his head, while Sime Woodley was throttling him.

But the party of scouts knew nothing of this. To them it was a puzzle altogether inexplicable—Indians wearing a wig!

While they were endeavoring to solve the enigma, another cry claimed their attention.

A second searcher had found something else under the shadow of the live oak. He had picked up two things, of themselves simple enough, but in that spot significant. One was an orange blossom, the other a sprig of cypress. The first was crushed, as if it had received rough handling; the second might have had the same without showing it.

There was no cypress seen growing near, and certainly no orange-tree. They could think of only one place where the sprig could have been plucked or the flower gathered—the mission garden!

Now was it remembered, that the last place where Colonel Armstrong's daughters had been seen was in the garden, or going toward it. Who but they had plucked orange-blossoms? And who but they was likely to have brought them thither?

Then they must have been with the men who rode the shod horses! A new mystery!

The scouts were in a quandary; and for a while they remained under the oak discussing the sign, and trying to interpret it.

They had already ascertained that the shod horses did not return to the ford; but went on up the river, on the side where seen.

Hawkins, at length, put an end to the consultation, by saying:

"You, Cris Tucker, if Mr. Dupre don't object, go back 'cross the river, and straight up t'other side to the mission. Ride fast as your horse can take you. Tell the colonel what we've done, and what we've seen. Tell him about the trail o' shod horses, that appear to have gone up the river this side. Say, we've taken after, and are going to follow them far as their trail leads. There's only five of them, so we needn't be afeerd. Tell the colonel not to despair, but get all the boys ready, and keep by the building till we come. An', Cris, just to comfort the old gentleman, tell him that maybe we'll bring back the dear girls along wi' us."

"I'll do as ye say," was the simple response of the young hunter, seeing that Dupre signified assent.

After which he galloped off, and soon after went plunging across the ford; while the party of scouts, Hawkins again guiding it, proceeded up on stream, on the trail of the shod horses.

CHAPTER XII.

AGAIN JOY.

Though riding in all haste, it was near mid-day when Cris Tucker came in sight of the mission building, bearing the report sent by the scouts. The time consumed by them in scrutinizing the cross trails had thus late delayed him.

The colonists, who anxiously awaited their return, describing a single horseman afar off, were thrown into a fresh state of excitement and alarm.

It did not tranquilize them to identify the horseman as their hunter Tucker; which they did, long before he had got within speaking distance. For he was alone, and spurring his horse as if pursued!

Where were the others? Had the scouting party fallen into ambush, and been cut off? Were they all killed, except Tucker, who was riding as if the last left of them?

The colonists crowded around Colonel Armstrong, and watched the scout as he came on. Silently—for no one ventured to offer an explanation of his being alone. They trembled, too, at the thought that the Indians might be close behind—perhaps a countless host, enough to surround the little settlement and instantly annihilate it! They and theirs might be swept off—consumed as dry grass in a prairie conflagration!

Colonel Armstrong could not help sharing their apprehensions, though they moved him no more. His daughters gone, he had quite given way to despair. And now, he who was to have been his son-in-law—the generous youth long since seeming a son—he, too, a victim to the hostility of the red-skinned robbers. Despairing before, the shock of this further bereavement rendered him almost beside himself.

With pulses quick beating his fellow-settlers clustered around him, awaiting the scout's approach.

As soon as the latter was near, each in his own way called out for the news, all speaking with equal eagerness.

A load was lifted from their hearts, when Tucker shouted back in response:

"No bad news, gentlemen! Rayther good than f'otherways."

A simultaneous shout of relief hailed the announcement; and in calmer mood they listened for further explanation.

Tucker, dismounting, and coming face to face with Colonel Armstrong, gave a detailed account of what the scouting party had seen and done; not forgetting to add the hopeful words with which his comrade, Hawkins, had intrusted him.

The report was like a sudden sunburst through skies long darkened.

Faces became brightened; even that of the old soldier showing something like cheerfulness.

Then arose the inquiry, what they were to do?

It was answered by Tucker imparting the advice of which he was the bearer.

Coming from Hawkins, their guide and hunter, in whom they had confidence, and indorsed by Dupre, it was sufficient to decide them.

Although ready for the route, armed and equipped—horses caparisoned, haversacks provisioned for a half-week's campaign—all chafing with impatience to set forth in pursuit of the plunderers—they made a final effort to curb it, and await the return of the scouting-party.

To Colonel Armstrong it was an irksome interregnum; during which he was again a prey to dark imaginings, the more unendurable because unrelieved by the excitement of action.

It needed more than mere patience; reliance on God, in the full strength of Christian resignation.

God gave him his reward. Just as the sun was setting over the valley of the San Saba—the departing rays of roseate hue kissing the cupola of the old mission church—a mounted party could be descried coming from the direction of the river. In its midst appeared two figures, by their floating drapery recognizable as feminine, even in the far distance.

And when nearer, it could be seen they were not Indian squaws, nor yet women of the common class. No coarse woolen gowns of homespun copperas stripe concealed their forms. Instead, skirts of costly fabric—the produce of foreign looms—draped down to their ankles, as they sat sideways upon saddles intended for a different style of equitation.

Long before they had reached the mission building a crowd was around, escorting them on their way; and when they at length drew bridle by the walls, arms eagerly outstretched receiving, let them gently down.

In front of the San Saba mission house was repeated that tableau once before witnessed far, far away: Colonel Armstrong standing between his two splendid daughters, as on the eve of abandoning the old home; their arms again enfolding his neck, their eyes gazing into his with a filial affection, that had evidently lost none of its strength in the new one.

The spectacle only differed in now having witnesses—two who seemed especially interested. These were Dupre, and the young surgeon Wharton; the former giving ardent love glances to Jessie, that were as ardently returned; while the congratulations of the latter, bestowed upon her sister, were met by a melancholy smile and absent air, that might have admonished him, he had no hope there.

It ended in a general rejoicing; only restrained by what had befallen the unfortunate household servants. The fate of the stricken victims—slaves though they were—caused true sorrow to their masters, both kind-hearted men.

Nor had the money-worth anything to do with it. Even the large amount of cash carried off by the robbers did not give its owner the slightest concern. Not then, as he stood by his affianced bride, with her cheeks flushed from excitement more bloomingly than ever. Having her by his side, and love in his heart, there was still room in it for pity, but none for sordid regrets.

Little cared the generous Creole for the loss of his fifty thousand dollars. It was not costing him a thought; and at that moment the walls of the old mission might have rung with merry laughter, as when its cowed occupants made carousal, but for the corpses still seen in its courtyard. But that grim spectacle of death, by horrid wholesale assassination, checked all tendency to mirth. Contemplating it, there could be no gayety, much less laughter.

Still was there contentment with the turn events had taken. For all saw the precipice on which they had been standing, and how near they had been to going over it. They could not be other than satisfied, that the circumstances were not worse.

There was one who did not share the satisfaction—could not. Amidst the general congratulations Helen Armstrong, retired from the rest, was yet suffering anxiety of the keenest kind. For long there had been a cloud upon her brow; there was one there still, though now from a different cause. It was no more the somber shadow of melancholy, tranquil in its sadness, but the excited look of nervous apprehension, manifesting itself by glances that wandered, cheeks that were pallid, and lips set in silence.

Charles Clancy: she might never more see him! What if he should be killed in keeping his stern vow? His filial affection, his loyalty, she could, and did admire. But then to think that these might leave her a mourner—throughout all her life!

True, she had confidence in his strength and skill; in all the qualities to insure success in the undertaking upon which he had set forth. She believed him capable of anything. What woman does not have this belief about the man she loves? But she had forebodings; now more than ever—now that she had become acquainted with the real circumstances, and knew they were not red, but white savages with whom he had to deal. Woodley had told her all about Borlasse. He was the big fellow her sister had seen in the streets of Natchitoches. She was informed of the affair of the whipping-post at Nacogdoches; and could see in that old enmity enough to seal Clancy's fate, should it be his misfortune to fall in with the robber band. She dreaded this more than his encountering Darke.

Now home again, herself and sister safe, she felt the keenest apprehensions about the safety of her lover.

While giving way to them, a comforter came to her side—Simeon Woodley.

But the backwoodsman, trying to cheer her, was himself not without anxiety.

He could not help knowing that Clancy was in danger, and deeply regretted having allowed him to go alone.

But he was now to set out in search of him, and without loss of time. His self-reproach spurred him to haste, which he had been urging upon the others already organized for the pursuit. For although circumstances had changed by the recovery of the captives, chase was still to be given to the robbers. There was the treasure to be got back, as also castigation given for the crime—death for the murders committed. There was motive sufficient for pursuing them to the bitter end; and a word from Woodley fired the intending pursuers afresh, making them eager to set out.

Their impatience reached its climax when Colonel Armstrong, with head uncovered, his white hair blown up by the evening breeze, stood before them, and said:

"Fellow-citizens! We have to thank the Almighty that our dear ones have escaped a dread danger. I am

speaking, not of my own daughters, but yours as well—your wives, sisters and children. And, while thanking God for his goodness, let us remember, there is a man whom He sent to assist us, also deserving our gratitude. A brave young man, whom we all believed dead, murdered. He is still alive; let us hope he is. You know whom I mean. Simeon Woodley has told you of the danger he is now in. Rashly, of his own doing, some of you may say, or think. But that's not the question now; nor would it be a just reflection. Our duty is to pursue this band of desperate outlaws; not for the money they've made off with—no matter about that—but to rescue this noble youth, if by ill fortune he has fallen into their hands. Friends and fellow-citizens! come what will, cost what it may, at all risks *Charles Clancy must be saved!*"

The enthusiastic shout, uttered in response to the old soldier's speech, told that the pursuit, whether successful or not, would be energetic and earnest.

Helen Armstrong, standing a little retired, now looked hopeful, and proudly confident.

Her hope came from hearing that shout—her pride, at the popularity of him to whom she had given her heart and promised her hand. Happiness, too, in knowing that for the bestowal of both she need no longer fear the frown of her father.

The night was nigh on; but this did not deter the pursuers from setting forth. They had a long journey before them, over thirty miles of travel, ere they could reach their destination. But they knew where this was; there would be no need for tracking now. To save his neck, Bosley had turned State's evidence, and told them all.

Before parting, Woodley sidled up to Helen Armstrong; and, in a whisper said:

"Don't ye be frettin', Miss Helen. Thar ain't much likelihood o' danger arter all. Charley Clancy knows how to take care o' hisself. An' ef he be alive anywhar on the purairas o' Texas, trust Sime Woodley for findin' an' bringin' him safe back to the only gurl he cares for, and that's y'urself, I reck'n. Ef ill-luck shed hev it that they've got holt o' him—Wagh! I won't talk o' sech a thing. They hain't got him. They can't kill him. The man ain't yet born that's to gie his death wound to Charley Clancy. Thar's only one ked do that, and that one air a woman; not by a gun-bullet, but by a glance o' her eyes, that w'd say she'd ceased to love him. I know she won't gie that glance—niver!"

There was a tone of interrogation in the last words of the hunter; something of the same in his eye, as he looked half askant at her he was addressing. He had noticed the assiduities of the young surgeon. Was it this made him conclude his speech in such strange fashion?

If he had any shadow of doubt about her fealty to his friend and comrade, it must have passed away on receiving her rejoinder. It was but the echo of his own final word, softly, but emphatically, pronounced:

"Never!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ROBBERS' RENDEZVOUS.

A STREAM running through a canoned channel, with banks rising three hundred feet above its bed. They soar up almost vertically, forming twin cliffs that front one another, their facades not half so far apart. Rough with projecting points of rock, and scarred by water erosion, they look like giants with grim visages engaged in mutual gaze. In places they approach, almost touching; then, diverging, sweep round the opposite side of an ellipse; again converging, like the curved handles of callipers. Through the spaces thus opened the stream continues; though not in a channel, cliff-confined, but through little valleys of oblong oval shape, more or less regular, whose vivid verdure, contrasting with the somber escarpments above, and the brown plain stretching beyond, likens them to brightly-tinted landscape pictures set in rustic frame.

The traveler who attempts to go along the stream in question will have to keep upon the crest of either cliff: for no nearer can he approach to its deeply indented channel. And here he will see only the sterile, treeless plain; or, if forms of vegetation meet his eye, they will be such as but strengthen the impression of sterility—some scrambling mezquite bushes, clumps of cactaceae, perhaps the spheroidal form of a melocactus, or a yucca, with its tuft of rigid leaves—the latter resembling a bunch of bayonets rising above the musket "stack" on a military parade-ground.

He will have no view of the bright green foliage expanding itself in the river valley, a hundred yards below the hoofs of his horse. He will not even get a glimpse of the stream itself; unless by going close to the edge of a precipice, and craning his neck over. And to do this, he must needs diverge from his course, to avoid the transverse rivulets, each trickling adown the bed of its own deep-cut arroyo.

Such unapproachable streams are many of them affluents of the Upper Colorado, still unexplored by the land-seeking speculator. For there is no land on them worth "locating"—at least, by those who look forward to forming plantations upon an extended scale.

But there are spots to attract the squatter or hunter—the elliptical spaces of river bottom above described—some of them like little Gardens of Eden, reposing hundreds of feet below the surface of the surrounding plain.

One of these semi-subterranean valleys claims our attention. Looking down into it from the cliff edge, we behold a vegetation of every shade and hue, from clearest emerald to darkest olive green. We see a stream gliding on through its center, with the sheen of silver and the sinuosity of a snake. We observe birds of bright plumage, with pinions spread, sitting from tree to tree. We hear their shrill cries and sweet warblings, all in striking contrast with the somber silence of the desert around.

If we think of descending into this sunken Paradise, or Hesperides, we shall have to make a long detour, and go down through one of the *gulches* intersecting the plateau at right angles to that of the main stream. And we should have difficulty in discovering which one of them would afford a practicable path to the valley below. No traveler of the common kind would be likely to discover it.

Yet some have certainly; as is proved by a group of tents standing under the tall pecan trees, that, following the stream at this point, extend back to the base of the bluff.

They are tents of rude construction, partly covered with the skins of animals, partly with scraps of old canvas, in places eked out with a bit of blanket or a cast coat.

No one could mistake them for the tents of ordinary travelers; and they are equally unlike those that would

be seen in an encampment of Indians. To whom, then, do they belong?

Were their owners present there would be no difficulty in answering the question. But they are not. Neither outside or inside, is a soul to be seen; not anywhere around! No human form appears in the valley; no voice of man is heard reverberating from the cliffs. If there were, the birds would neither be so strident, nor so softly melodious.

And yet the place shows signs of recent occupation. There have been fires outside the tents, but lately smoldering; and within, implements, utensils, articles of bedding, provisions. In some there are bottles and stone jars, containing strong drinks, both brandy and whiskey; and, besides these, good store of tobacco. Than this no better proof that the encampment, though deserted, is not abandoned, whether its owners be white men or Indians.

Who and what are they? Redskins or palefaces, which?

The question will soon be answered; for yonder they come, in the shape of a cohort of horsemen.

Descending through one of the ravines that lead down from the upper plane, they make toward the river bottom. The confident air with which they advance, proclaims them the owners of the empty tents.

They ride in Indian file—the narrow path compelling them to this mode of march. To all appearance they are Indian warriors. The copper hue of their skin, with its besmearing of paint, the buckskin breech clouts, fringed leggings, and feather head-dresses, are all articles of Indian costume.

There is one among them who differs from the rest, as also from the American aboriginal. His skin is yellow, not red; his hair crisped, not hanging. And, instead of dressed deerskin, he is clad in cotton habiliments; a coarse shirt and loose drawers, with wool hat upon his head. His complexion bespeaks him a mulatto; his apparel a plantation slave. Although with the warriors, he is evidently not of them. The manner in which he is treated proclaims him their prisoner.

Once in the valley bottom, they break rank—or, rather file—and ride on toward the tents in a ruck. This is not Indian discipline, and should cause doubt about their being of the race of red men.

After dismounting and making their horses fast to the trees, they enter the tents; bring out bottles and tobacco; take drinks, and commence smoking.

Beyond this they make no further movement—either to unsaddle their horses or strip off their accoutrements, as if they were purposing a prolonged stay.

They evidently await the coming of others, with some one to give them directions.

They have not long to wait. Soon a second and smaller party is seen coming down the gorge; like the first costumed *a la Comanche*—at its head a man of herculean stature—evidently the chief of all.

As to who and what are the owners of the tents there need be no longer concealment—Borlase and his band of freebooters. That fair spot, lovely as an Elysium, is a rendezvous of robbers—the lair of the worst cut-throats in all the territory of Texas!

On reaching the river bottom, Borlase and his escort ride straight on to the encampment.

Entering it, he gazes around, his glance sent inquiringly among the tents.

Then, in loud tone, he asks:

"Haven't Quantrell and Bosley got here yet?"

There is no response, and he repeats the interrogatory.

It is answered by one of those who came first upon the ground.

"No, cap', they ain't got hyar yet: we hain't seed ne'er a sign of 'em."

The chief gives utterance to an exclamation resembling the bellow of a bull, only more blasphemous. Then, gritting his teeth together, he flings himself from the saddle, his escort doing likewise.

When on foot, he says to his surrounding:

"Boys! I reckon they must have gone astray while crossin' the big plain; an' that's what's detainin' them. 'Twar a mistake to trust to two greenhorns, as both air. I see that now, but there's no help for it. Lucky they hain't got the shiners along wi' them. I guess they'll find their way after wanderin' a bit. If they don't, some o' us must go back in search of them. Meantime, there ain't no reason for our playin' the savage any longer. I s'pose you all want once more to become civilized human bein's, and as such make a visit to the settlements. With the contents of these barrels to buy diversion with, I reckon ye'll be inclined to spend a month or two 'mong the saynoritas of San Antonio. Is that your idea?"

The answer was a shout of affirmation, simultaneous, unanimous.

"Then let's prepare for leavin'. And I say the sooner the better. If we've got to go back in search of them that's now missing, we'll be safer to change the color of our skins, as well as cast off this truck that's clingin' around us. It's done good service this time, and may do ag'in. For all that, we won't want it any more now. Therefor' let's pitch it away for the present, and take a plunge out o' savage life into civilization."

The speaker ends his harangue by a hearty laugh at the *jeu d'esprit* thus let off, in which his auditory joins. After which he commences peeling off the garb that gave to his rough, gigantic figure a certain air of picturesqueness.

Off goes buckskin breeches, leggings, and moccasins, with the plumed tiara encircling his brow. Then stepping inside one of the tents, he comes out again holding in his hand what appears to be a piece of soap. It is this.

Making straight toward the stream, he plunges waist-deep into the water; and sets about scrubbing his skin like one determined upon a severe course of hydropathic treatment.

His comrades are soon beside him, imitating his example.

When they return to the bank, and there stand dripping in *purs naturalibus*, it can be seen that there is not an Indian among them. They are all the boasted Caucasian race, white—or rather may it be called tripe color—both in shape and hue far inferior to the bronze-skinned symmetrical savage.

After performing their ablutions, they return to the tents, and pass inside, there to complete their toilet.

They soon reappear, one after another, in dresses very different from those they have thrown off, and no two of them alike. Some wear the handsome backwoods hunting-shirt, with fringed cape and skirt, balze leggings below. Others are garbed as Mexican rancheros, in velvet jacket, calzonerias, serape, and waist-scarf. Still others are dressed in the sky-blue cottonade blouse and pantaloons of the Louisiana creole;

while a few, of less tasty exterior, show coats of the copperas-dyed homespun of Tennessee, or the gray-blue "jeans" of Kentucky.

Their head wear exhibits a like fanciful variety; caps and hats of all sorts and shapes; the former of coonskin, catskin, and cloth; the latter of felt, wool, Panama, and beaver—among them the black-glaze broad-brim of Mexico.

Borlase reaps ears in his rough blanket coat, belted and booted as when first first seen in the bar-room of the Choctaw Chief.

Conceit of personal appearance was not among the weaknesses of the Texan robber chief, who in this respect had no affinity with either of his Italian prototypes, Fra Diavolo or Mazzarini. But, if not so polite, or fashionably picturesque, the Transatlantic bandit was quite as formidable as they; and could stop a traveler, and cut his throat, as effectively as either.

With their change of garb the prairie pirates also make some change in their mode of armament. Their guns, pistols, and knives they retain; while the spears, tomahawks, and bows are abandoned. These, collected into a heap, with the cast Indian disguises and other insignia of the savage, are carried into a cavern in the cliff close by, and there secreted with due care. As Borlase said, they may be wanted again.

The transformation scene ended, the robbers now turn their attention to things culinary.

During their absence from camp, they have been sustaining themselves on drink, of which they have a plentiful supply—the proceeds of a former raid down the Colorado. They have brought nothing away from Dupre's wine-bins, the barrels of silver coin being load sufficient.

The appetite of hunger is now keen upon them, and they have the wherewith to satisfy it. There are skilled hunters among them, and several haunches of venison, with a bear's ham or two, are seen hanging from the branches of the pecan-trees, beyond reach of lynx or coyote.

Several of the band, accustomed to act as caterers and cooks, have already commenced preparing some of these for the spit; and the choicest pieces are soon frizzling in the blaze of a huge hickory fire.

And soon after, the robbers make their Homeric meal. Eating, drinking, and smoking occupy their time, until the sun sinks behind the crest of the cliffs, and the crepuscular light, stealing over the valley, empurples the foliage of the pecan trees.

Still no Phil Quantrell comes, no Bill Bosley; no sign of either them or their captives!

Borlase, at first only impatient, begins to feel seriously alarmed. He longs to have white arms around him, a soft, smooth body in his own rough embrace.

As time passes he grows anxious, dreading disappointment.

The sun is now down, the moon up; and still no appearance of the missing ones—either men or women!

Calling his associates from their cups, he communicates his apprehensions, and proposes that a party shall go back over the plain in search of them.

But the robbers are now too far gone in drink. Their captain no longer commands them. They do not care either for Phil Quantrell, or the captives committed to his charge. And as to the danger of their being pursued by the scurvy settlers, why let them pursue if they like. There isn't any possibility of such simpletons being able to track them across the upper plain. Besides, they wouldn't dare venture so far, believing them to be Indians. Bah! They are safe enough; they are enjoying themselves. Let Quantrell, Bosley, and the Armstrong girls, all go to the devil together!

With these and other like speeches is their chief's proposal met. Drink has made his men mutinous and disregardful of their duty, as of him.

He grows angry, roars like an infuriated bear, and threatens to quarrel with them. But they are all against him, and he sees it is no use attempting extreme measures.

In the morning, they say, they will assist him in the search—go anywhere he wishes—but that night they must make merry, and drink—drink!

Borlase has to yield. To drown his chagrin he joins them in their revelry, and drinks deeply as they.

The debauch ends in one and all becoming bestially intoxicated, each staggering as he best can to a place of repose.

Some find their way inside the tents; others drop down where they are, and fall asleep *sub Jove*, or under the shadow of the pecan-trees.

CHAPTER XIV.

SHADOWS OF EVIL OMEN.

"Oh, God!"

The exclamation came from a head without a body; at least there was none visible.

There was one, nevertheless—buried beneath the earth.

It was Charles Clancy who gave utterance to the prayerful apostrophe.

A groan followed, as his eyes went wandering over the plain. He could see it for nearly the half of a circle—a great circle such as surrounds you upon the sea—but with a view no better than one has lying along the thwarts of a boat, or afloat upon a plank.

He gave out a second groan, as his glance fell to the ground, after sweeping the semicircle.

There was no one in sight; no likelihood there would be; no chance of any one coming that way; no hope of his being released from his living grave.

It was to prevent this, that they who buried him had gone more than a mile out of their way and chosen that remote spot. For though they might be pursued, their pursuers would not note the deviation. It was on a part of the arid tableland, where the turf was specially firm and desiccated. Even a horse with shodding sharpened for frost might pass over it without making mark that could be discerned, except by the most skillful tracker.

There was one who could have taken up their trail—Simeon Woodley.

Clancy thought of him, but with little hope. He remembered that the backwoodsman must, by that time be far away. He could not yet have reached the mission-house. From where they had parted it was at least twenty miles to the upper crossing, and ten more down the opposite side of the San Saba—a good day's journey, even without impediment. Besides, there was no certainty of what awaited them at its termination; of what had happened to the people at the mission, or how long his comrade might be there detained.

And would Simeon Woodley see the necessity of coming back? He might not; for, on parting with him, Clancy had made no point of this. In his eager-

ness to set out after Dick Darke, he had said nothing to Woodley about when and where he was to meet him again, and thought only of his conducting the sisters safely home.

Therefore, his comrade might not come back to search for him. If he did, there was but slight chance of his finding him—till too late.

Shored up to the throat, with the earth hard packed around his ribs, he felt physical pain.

But it was nothing to the mental suffering he was now made to endure. This was indeed agony.

Nor was it all for himself. He thought of his murdered mother, her death yet unavenged; of his own wrongs, and the satisfaction he had sought, still untaken. With anguish, also, he remembered that speech spoken under the live oak, when Helen Armstrong said:

"You will come back to be true to me, as you have been to your mother. If not, I shall soon be dead."

In the bitter cup, there was this much more bitterness—his death would kill her.

And it would be his fault—all his; brought about by his reckless imprudence in following out the one idea that had seized possession of his soul—too sternly seized it—the killing of Richard Darke.

Was there no hope of escape from this painful position? No chance of getting rescued? Would nobody come? No. There was not the slightest likelihood. On that wide waste, sweeping smoothly up to the sky, there was nothing visible.

But in the sky itself, something was seen, just as the day reached its meridian. The sun, shining vertically down, was at intervals obscured by shadows flitting across its disk.

Not clouds. The shadows were more transient; besides, they had shape.

Clancy knew what was causing them. He was only buried a little above the shoulders, and had still play for the vertebrae of his neck. By throwing his head backward he could see the firmament above, to its vertex. But he did not need this to tell him what, ever and anon, was making a penumbra over the sun. The shadows outlined on the smooth plain, in magnified proportion showed long outstretched necks and broad-spread wings. He knew that vultures were above him. He soon saw them.

It was a sight bodily significant. It brought vividly back to his remembrance one of the taunting speeches of Borlase.

To cause him keener apprehension, if this were possible, it but needed the addition of wolves.

And these were soon added. A group of coyotes, gathering in from all sides, became part of the *tableau vivant*. A horrid spectacle to him whose head formed the central figure of the group!

No wonder he again groaned, again repeating the prayerful apostrophe.

On, throughout the day, past its meridian, through the long afternoon, across the short interval of a Texan twilight, and into the light of a Texan moon, had he to endure this terrible torture.

Alone, with only the companionship of hideous, hostile things—wolves threatening to tear the skin from his skull; vultures preparing to peck the eyes out of his head!

Oh, it was horrible! Why went he not mad?

There were moments when his senses well nigh gave way—when the horror came near unseating his reason.

Manfully he struggled against it—thoughtfully, and with reliance on Him whose name had so repeatedly passed from his lips.

He was sustained, too, by thinking of a man—one whom God might yet send to his succor.

Though faint, there was still a hope that Simeon Woodley might come that way, and in time.

About the time alone was Clancy apprehensive. He knew the backwoodsman would be certain to search for, and equally certain to find him. But living, or dead? This was the uncertainty.

Still there was a chance, however slight, and the thought of it did something to support him.

It determined him to hold out as long as life would allow—hold out, and have patience.

So resolved, he did all in his power to fight off the wolves and frighten the vultures. Fortunately for him, the former were only coyotes, and the latter but turkey-buzzards. Had it been on an African desert, with bearded vultures above and hyenas around, his agony would soon have ended. But he knew his enemies and their nature; that, despite their predatory habits, both the birds and the beasts were cowardly and craven—both timid as hares—except when the quarry had been stricken down for them.

They must not know he was helpless; and to deceive them, he shook his head, rolled his eyes, and shouted.

He only did so at intervals, taking care to economize both the cries and gestures. Otherwise they would soon have ceased to avail him.

They stood him in stead throughout the afternoon, the evening, the sunset, and twilight. Then the vultures went away, and he had only to deal with the wolves that remained sole masters of the situation.

The change, instead of being favorable, was more likely to prove disastrous. The prairie-wolf, a true jackal by daylight shy as a fox, by night changes its nature. Then it becomes emboldened, and will spring more readily upon its prey.

They had been too long looking at the head, and too often startled by the sounds proceeding from it, to regard these any longer. The time had arrived for attacking it.

Blending their lugubrious howl—half bark, half bay—they closed nearer from all sides, as if for the final assault.

Once more Clancy made appeal to Heaven. Once more sent he up the agonized cry, "Oh God!" this time adding, "Heaven help me!"

As if his prayer had been at length heard—heard and responded to—a sound came over the plain.

At the first touch, he could tell it to be the hoof-stroke of a horse.

The coyotes heard it too, and with closed jaws and tails suddenly dropped, they commenced retreating backward.

Soon Clancy could see them no more. Instead, he saw that which drew from him an ejaculation of joy.

Before his face, out upon the moonlit plain, was a form easily distinguishable as that of a man on horseback. He was riding in slow pace, as if he had strayed, or was seeking for something lost.

Suddenly he made stop, and remained for a moment motionless. The group of wolves, now scattered and skulking off, appeared to have attracted his attention.

Presently he moved on again; and Clancy could see, that the horse was now headed toward himself.

"Thank Heaven!" was his muttered exclamation; which he was about to follow up by a name, pronounced in a louder tone.

"Simeon Woodley!" he would have shouted; but seeing that the horseman approached with hesitation, he remained silent.

And soon had he reason to be satisfied at having done so. For as the night rider drew near, he saw it was not Woodley, nor any one resembling him.

The horseman was on the moon side of him, and therefore with face and features in shadow. But his figure, seen against the sky in sharp silhouette, was traceable throughout all its outlines; and in these Clancy beheld a man clad in Indian costume. The fillet of feathers surmounting his head was chiefly conspicuous, as also some metal neck ornaments, that glittered under the glare of the moon.

It scarce needed these to identify him as Richard Darke!

CHAPTER XV.

A NOCTURNAL STRAY.

It was, indeed, Richard Darke whom Clancy saw advancing toward the spot.

How he came there must needs now be told, going back to the place where we last left him. The time,

Holding his hand, with spread palm, over his brows, he took note of the sun's altitude. It showed about two hours above the horizon.

In making this observation, his first thought was, that he had slept away so much of the morning.

He reproached himself for having done so—adding an oath at his own stupidity.

Getting intoxicated had been an act of imprudence; still greater, in going to sleep on it.

There might be unpleasant consequences. What if Borlasse and the band had gone past, leaving him behind—alone? At least two hours of clear daylight, more than time for them to get back from the mission. Had they got back, and kept on to the rendezvous?

The reflection made him feel uncomfortable, and he stood, not knowing what to do. If his robber associates had already passed over the plain, his course would be to hasten after them. But there might be danger in doing this. There was a possibility of others following them at the same time—*pursuers*? The outraged colonists might be after them—their wrongs urging them to as much haste as the plunder-laden pirates could possibly make. Now that he knew Simeon Woodley was in the field, there was a probability that the backwoodsman would be guide to the pursuit; and Richard Darke had reason to know something of Woodley's skill

"I'll give them another half-hour. Surely they'll be up before that. If they don't, I'll take my chance and ride on to the rendezvous; though d—d if I know whether I can find the way. Hang that horse! He's making noise enough to be heard ten miles off. I must put an end to that!"

Going back into the grove, he routed the swarming insects, and for a while kept the horse quiet.

But, thirst still tormenting him, as the flies did his horse, he could no longer endure it; and again strode off to the outer edge of the copse.

There, with his glance cast skyward, he made a fresh observation of the sun's altitude. It brought a quicker beating to his heart than that he had felt regarding it before. The golden disk seemed nearer to the horizon. The sun was sinking in the sky instead of ascending. He had mistaken west for east. *It was evening, not morning!*

A thrill of fear ran through his frame on discovering the mistake he had made. No wonder. Now he felt sure that Borlasse and the band had passed by. And perhaps, also, pursuers!

"Great God! What am I to do?"

Thus profanely did he interrogate himself.

"If I attempt going on over the plain, I may be seen by Sime Woodley and his party. That would be certain



MOTHER! THOU ART AVENGED!

too, which was an early hour of the morning, just before break of day.

A bright sun rose over the black-jack grove where he still lay, doubled up in drunken slumber. Its rising did not awake him; nor yet the fierce rays when it was higher up in heaven; for the thick foliage hindered him from feeling their fervor. He was only awakened by the stamping of his horse, the animal agitated by the stinging of flies.

He had heard the sound several times; but, half drunk, half dreaming, had not given heed to it.

When at length aroused, he was still partially inebriated, though sober enough to perceive that he had overslept himself.

He started to his feet, and stared around with an air of bewilderment.

What time was it?

He took out his watch, and gazed unsteadily at the dial. No good that, even had his vision been ever so clear. The hands were at rest—the watch, not wound up the night before, had run down.

He glanced skyward, to get sight of the sun. The thick foliage intervened, and he could see the firmament only in flakes here and there.

He staggered out to the edge of the grove, to obtain a better view. Then the golden orb was before his face; and its rays, dazzling his eyes, blinded him.

as a tracker. Nay, the pursuers might also have gone past! If so, there would be a double risk in his striking out over that treeless plain.

"Two hours of clear daylight!" he said to himself. "Has there been so much? Confound the watch! Let me have another squint at the sun!"

Again shading his eyes, he looked up at the sky, once more measuring the arc between the sun's disk and the dark line below. A backwoodsman himself, coupled with his late experience on the prairies, he was able to do this, with as much certainty as the most skilled astronomer.

"No," he at length said in jubilation, the tone telling of satisfaction; "not two hours yet—not quite. About an hour and three-quarters, I should think? Bah! I've been putting myself into a scare for nothing. I guess they haven't gone by yet."

Again doubting, he continued:

"How am I to know for certain? Not by staying here, unless they're still to come along; which isn't at all certain. Besides, I'm choking with thirst. Half an hour of the hell-fired thing will go well-nigh killing me. I must make tracks out of this, one way or the other."

"Water! Where am I to find it? Not a drop on this dry plain! None nearer than the river, and in that direction I haven't go. What in the name of old Nick am I to do?"

death to me. From the ugly backwoodsman I need look for no mercy. And if I stay here much longer, this cursed thirst will do the same for me. Hach! it's choking me now!

"I must endure it, for all that. I daren't go out of the grove before night; I must wait till there's darkness over the plain. How soon will that be?"

Again he looks at the sun's disk, now less dazzling; its blaze becoming gradually obscured by the strata of haze overhanging the horizon.

"In less than an hour it will be night. Well, I reckon I can stand it that long. I must."

He strides back to where he has left his horse; stays there awhile; then returns to take another look at the sun.

He repeats this maneuver twice, thrice. At his third survey he sees the orb of day going down behind the far-off horizon.

He has only waited for this. He knows that the twilight is short, and will be over while he is adjusting the caparison of his horse.

It is almost past as he climbs into the saddle; quite so when, mounted, he comes out upon the edge of the grove and casts his glance over the treeless plain. The moon has not yet risen, and the last lingering rays of twilight empurple the prairie expanse.

There is now obscurity sufficient to give him confi-

dence for going on; and on he rides, as rapidly as he can, taking caution into account.

He does not go far before becoming uncertain as to his course. He knows it should be north, or nearly. On starting out he had the sunset gleam to guide him. With this on his left he has confidently ridden on. But soon the lingering rays disappear from the western horizon, leaving it leaden gray, like the rest of the sky circle around and the firmament above.

He now looks to the stars, searching for the Great Bear. But a white film, ascending from the sterile plain, has crept across the northern sky, concealing the Polar constellation.

No longer knowing what course to pursue, he draws back his bridle-rein, and checks his horse to a halt. He twists himself round in the saddle, directing his glance upon every point of the compass.

Plenty of stars to be seen; constellations of many names. But he is not enough astronomer to know, or take bearings by them. He can only tell the Great Bear and the pointers of the Lesser—neither of which is visible.

In the midst of his perplexity a light appears, giving him relief. It is the silvery sheen of the moon. It thrills him with joy. Strange, too! Soft, sweet, and so like innocence, one might suppose it would sting his guilty conscience with keen reproach.

He is too hardened for that. He thinks not of his crimes, but only of escaping from the dilemma into which the last of them has led him.

The moon gives him a clew to his course; and, once more slackening rein, he moves on.

Not far, before seeing something that attracts, and then fixes his attention.

Nothing to make him afraid. Only a pack of prairie wolves on the plain before him. They are grouped around some object—no doubt the carcass of an animal—stricken stag, or antelope. Curiosity would not tempt him to turn aside, and see what it was. But the wolves are in his way, or not far out of it.

He will deviate so much to see what they have been devouring.

They scatter off as he comes near. It is but a little thing they were around, seemingly not enough to give each a meal—not even a mouthful.

"What the devil is it?"

For the second time asking himself this question, he advances toward the object apparently so insignificant.

When close to it he draws suddenly back, at the same time giving utterance to a shriek—one so wildly intoned as to frighten the wolves still further off.

His need need not fear. Before his terrified shout has ceased to reverberate over the plain, he goes galloping off, as if Satan had seized hold of the tail of his horse!

There is another shout almost simultaneous, which seems to arise out of the earth! Speech, too, accompanies it; in which Richard Darke hears his own name pronounced, coupled with the cry—"Murderer!"

The second shout does not stay him. On the contrary, it sends fresh fear to his heart, and speed to his horse's heels.

He is soon far from the spot; but, long after, his hoof-strokes can be heard rebounding from the firm turf; these gradually growing indistinct; at length dying away upon the desert plain, till its surface is again silent as the chamber of a cavern.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BRACK OF HALF-BREEDS.

As the roystering robbers, one after another, succumbed to the strong drink, and rolled over asleep, so one after another the lights of the encampment became wasted, and went out.

Two only continued burning, in two small tents that stood a little apart from the rest.

One of these was occupied by the captain of the band, who was yet comparatively free from intoxication. He had kept so, partly because he could stand any amount of drink without giving way, and partly that he had his reasons for remaining sober.

Big lumbering brute though he appeared, Borlasse was gifted with a measure of common sense, along with a large share of low cunning.

A rude strategist in his way, he had brain to conceive with, courage to carry out his conceptions. Otherwise, he could not have been the acknowledged leader of twenty Texan frontiersmen; all of them, as himself, outlaws, and most having hands that had been imbrued in blood.

This night, as much as ever in his life, he needed to keep his head clear and cool.

Ever since recrossing the San Saba he had felt ill at ease. What had become of Quantrell, Bosley, and the women? He thought less of it then; supposing he would find them at the rendezvous. But they were not there, and where could they have gone?

For a time he was disposed to think Darke might himself be a traitor. Had he, too, discovered that Clancy was still alive; and, no longer in dread of the law—because no longer liable as a murderer—determined to separate himself from the band—an association with which he had become leagued through sheer necessity; and in the hour of his desperation?

Or had he encountered Clancy during the night and been killed by him?

Certainly these two men could not have met and again parted without one slaying the other. Borlasse was sufficiently *au fait* to their feud to feel sure of this.

But if Richard Darke were now dead, Clancy would have gone off with the Armstrong girls. He would not have been found carelessly straying—hunting, as he himself said, when taken.

Jim Borlasse now regretted not having put his prisoner to torture and forced him to a fuller confession.

He reproached himself with this negligence, as he sat reflecting in his tent, after his fellows had left him alone.

But there was a regret that far more affected him. Coarse, though he was, both in body and soul, without one iota of sentiment, he yet *loved*. True, it was animal passion, of the lowest, impurest kind. But it was also of the strongest; at the moment so overpowering him that he would have willingly surrendered his share of the silver taken from Louis Dupre to have possessed himself of Dupre's sweetheart.

And to think that he had been in possession of and had let her so easily escape! For he now began to fear that this would be the upshot.

While thus chafing, a thought came to his relief. Clancy would still be alive? What if he, Borlasse, should go back to the place where he had buried him; promise to release him, on the condition of his telling whether he had encountered Darke; at the same time threaten torture and death if he should refuse to confess the

truth. It would be a ten-mile ride; but what of that? He could not sleep without having satisfaction of some kind. He must know whether Darke was true or a traitor.

He had almost determined on this course when another idea occurred to him—a plan preliminary. He would first confess the mulatto, and, if need be, put him to torture.

Strange he had not thought of this before! It was not too late; and, gliding among the tents, he looked for the man of mixed blood.

He had no difficulty in finding him; for he knew he was in the other tent where the light was still burning. He was there in company with another *sang-meele*, of very different mixture—the half-Mexican, half-Indian—Fernand. The two were still carousing upon corn-whisky, fraternizing as if they had been born brothers.

For the mulatto was no longer treated as a prisoner. Made such, and so transported to the robbers' camp, there his captivity had ended, or become almost voluntary. In their culinary operations, the bandits had discovered in their yellow-skinned captive, a valuable help-mate. For Jupiter, like all his race, knew something of the science of gastronomy, being especially skilled at *barbecuing*.

He had shown so zealous in his new vocation, and altogether so contented with his captivity, that his captors soon ceased to look upon him as a prisoner, and began to regard him in the light of an associate. He had told them that he was Clancy's slave; hinted at harsh treatment; showed them a scarred back to prove it; and professed himself highly pleased at being separated from his master. In short, he declared his readiness to become a member of the freebooting fraternity—a useful obsequious servant, if that should be the conditions required of him.

Accepted as such, he entered upon his duties *con amore*, and with an alacrity that delighted them.

They did not think of questioning his professions of fidelity. An escaped slave, there was nothing strange in such instantaneous conversion; and they had taken him at his word; committing him only to the care of their comrade Fernand.

Borlasse, aware of all this, and knowing where Jupiter was to be found, approached the tent, and summoned him outside.

When he had taken him beyond earshot of his fellow *convites*, he set about confessing him; at first in friendly tone, and with a coaxing, confidential air.

The mulatto was a man of no ordinary mind. It had been his misfortune to be born a slave; and it was his superior intellect, chafing at the ignoble lot, that had made him a fugitive. The exercise of this intellect had already enabled him to mislead the prairie pirates, by making them believe he was quite contented to remain with them as their *chef de cuisine*.

While ostensibly engrossed with his new duties, he had been eagerly listening to their conversation. From it he had gathered enough to give him an idea of what they had done to his fellow-prisoner; and he was not without hope of being able to escape from the robbers' camp in time to release him.

In reply to the chief's questioning, he professed utter ignorance of everything.

He knew nothing of any Phil Quantrell, and no more of a Richard Darke. He never heard of either. He was Mass Clancy's slave, who had lately bought him. And here, in the most adroit manner, he again hinted at harsh treatment.

His young master had come to Texas to look out for land, where he intended to settle. He was in company with a party of other intended settlers; from whom he had separated but a short while before, leaving them at their camp, while he went off for a bit of a hunt.

Jupiter's tale was plausible enough. It was inspired by some words Clancy had hastily whispered, just before the two were taken.

He adhered to it, with a revolver held to his head, its cold steel touching his tawny skin.

The test satisfied Borlasse, who gave over interrogating him, and returned to his tent, leaving the mulatto free to go back to his own, and continue the interrupted carousal.

The two half-breeds had been long over their cups, and to all appearances both had imbibed deeply, since they talked as if far advanced toward a state of inebriety. For all this, they were still quite sober, each believing the other to be drunk.

Though thus mutually mistaken about one another's condition, each knew why he was not himself intoxicated. The grass forming a litter over the tent floor could have shown why. It had been dry at the commencement of their carousal; but was now saturated in a spot between the feet of both, where glass after glass of strong liquor had been spilled. Not accidentally, but with design, and surreptitiously; the men who thus poured it out concealing the fact from one another.

In the mutual deception each had his object. That of the mulatto was to get the *mestizo* drunk, in order that he might himself take departure from the place; while the latter, having suspicion of his design, was keeping sober to thwart it.

Fernand was an astute fellow; and, thrown more than any of the others into the company of the captive committed to his charge, more than they doubted his new fidelity.

As the time passed on, and drink after drink appeared to be swallowed, Jupiter began to despair. He had never come across a man who could stand so much corn whisky without succumbing to it, as he with whom he was now hobnobbing.

What could it mean? Was the *mestizo's* stomach coated with steel, and his head lined with iron?

Perhaps his boon companion would be making the same reflection about him? And he might also have been doing the same?

As soon as this suspicion crossed Jupiter's mind, he determined to watch the movements of his drinking companion.

He was not long before discovering a clew to the mystery, and why the latter was keeping sober as himself.

With eyes turned toward the entrance of the tent, but twisted askant, he observed the *mestizo* stealthily spilling his liquor.

The action was significant. The mulatto now knew that he himself was being watched and guarded.

But the moment before he had believed himself sure of escape. Drunkenness had disembarrassed him of the others. But here was one taking care not to get drunk; still wakeful as a watch-dog!

How was he to get rid of this vigilant sentinel? There was a way—only one; and the eyes of the

fugitive slave sparkled with a strange light as he reflected upon it. It was the lurid gleam that speaks of an intention to kill.

It only came after consideration, and with some repugnance. But then it came quickly, and with determination.

He must either kill the man by his side, or give up the purpose on which he had been reflecting—perhaps be himself killed.

Almost as quick was the action that followed. Watching the movements of the *mestizo*, until he detected him again spilling his liquor, he stooped toward him with a laugh, and asked him why he was practicing the trick.

As the interrogatory entered the other's ear, the blade of a bowie knife went through his heart, and he fell dead upon the floor of the tent, without even uttering a groan!

Blowing out the light, Jupiter glided from the tent, leaving a dead body behind him!

He glanced stealthily around, but saw nothing to stay him. Even the chief's tent was in darkness—for Borlasse had gone to bed, and all the other robbers were asleep, unconscious of the tragical incident that had transpired so near them.

Amid their snores, and loud stertorous breathing, the mulatto glided gently and silently out from among the tents, and as silently made his way to the inclosure where the horses were kept.

Pronouncing some words in an undertone, one of the animals, separating from the rest, came up, allowing him to lay hold of its forelock. It was the horse that belonged to Charles Clancy, which the freebooters had taken from him.

Jupiter had not caught the horse without a purpose. Over his left arm he carried a saddle and bridle.

The former was soon upon the animal's back, and the latter between its teeth.

The corral was inclosed by the usual zig-zag fence of roughly-split rails, its entrance being a "set of bars." To the old Mississippian slave these were familiar things, and he understood their manipulation.

The bars were gently let down, and as gently was the horse led through the opening.

There was no disturbance—no noise of any kind—not even when the fugitive, with the knife still dripping blood, severed the thong that tied Clancy's hound to a stake, and set the animal free.

The dog, like himself, seemed instinctively to know that there was a necessity for silence.

And while the inebriated freebooters lay asleep and snoring, the mulatto rode off from their midst, with a gun upon his shoulder, a pistol in his belt, and a bowie-knife hanging against his hip—the hound following at the horse's heels.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FAITHFUL FRIEND.

It is not necessary to say that the object seen by Richard Darke; and which gave him such a scare, was the head of Charles Clancy.

Nor need it be told, that from it proceeded those awe-inspiring words, which sent him off in wild gallop over the plain, the second shout ringing after like a hue-and-cry of vengeance.

After identifying the horseman as Darke, Clancy had preserved silence till the latter came close up, and seemingly identified him.

He supposed that his hour was come—now surely come. He had no other thought but that Darke had been to the robbers' rendezvous, seen Borlasse, and from him learning what had been done, was returning to take the life he had failed to take before.

So reflected he, while the horseman was in the act of advancing upon him.

But when the latter drew bridle, with a jerk that almost threw his horse upon its haunches; when the moon, falling upon his face, showed features distorted with fear, then Clancy's surmises underwent a sudden change, succeeded by others, that gave him the clew to that look of dread bewilderment.

Darke had not recognized him under the live oak, for their encounter was in shadow, as in silence. Since then he had not seen Borlasse, nor been to the robbers' rendezvous. He had lost his way, and was looking for it, when chance conducted him to the spot where he saw, as if rising out of the ground, the head of one he supposed long since dead—slain by his own hand!

These conjectures had passed through Clancy's mind quickly as flashes of lightning. And with equal quickness had been his resolve how to act.

Life was yet in him; hope still beating in his breast. Woodley might come; and Darke only needed a word to make him go.

That word was spoken, seemingly a response to the cry of terror the frightened ruffian had raised.

The result was as Clancy had calculated—Darke giving loose rein to his horse, and going off in scared, speechless retreat.

The relief felt by Clancy at his departure was not very much, and only momentary. Reflection told him it would be but a respite, and not a long one. The scoundrel would soon get over his scare, find his way to the robbers' rendezvous, and there learn all. Then would he surely return, and as surely glut his long-gathering vengeance; keener from being so often thwarted. Even if he did not, what could it matter to him, Clancy? Simeon Woodley might not arrive in time? He might not be able to find—

"Again the coyotes!"

Thus were his conjectures cut short, by the wolves once more making approach. And drawing nigh with renewed audacity, their ravenous instincts stronger than ever. The human enemy on horseback had not molested them, but gone off, leaving their prey unprotected. They were again free to assail—this time devour it.

Saluting the moon with melancholy whines they came loping up, one after another; until once more collected around that strange thing, that, while puzzling, had so long defied them. They feared it less now, and seemed determined soon to make themselves more familiar with it. They sprang in circles around it; now on one side, now on another; going in *chasses-croisées*, as through the mazes of a coliffion.

With their forms magnified under the moonlight, they looked like were-wolves dancing around a death's head; while their long-drawn, lugubrious wails, made appropriate music to the measure. A sight and sound terrible to him who saw and heard them!

Not as before. The time of keen terror had passed, along with the last lingerings of hope. He was now resigned to his fate, and ready to die. He believed death to be certain, and only wished it to come quickly. In

this last despairing moment he felt something like regret at having frightened Darke away. Had he not done so, it would have come quicker—perhaps easier. Better his skull had been cleft, killing him at once, than still alive, to have it torn—scalped, gnawed, mumbled over—by those jaws yawning open so near him!

The thought stifled reflection. It was horror appalling, torture excruciating!

He could not bear it much longer. No man could, however strong; however firm his faith in the mercy of the Omnipotent.

The last remained, but the first was fast failing him. He knew he must die; he wanted to die!

He would soon have his wish. The wolves were now nearer than ever. Within three feet of his face he saw the white serratures of teeth, and red painting tongues. He felt their hot, fetid breath steaming against his brow. Every instant he expected their jaws to close around his skull.

He shut his eyes, and prayed for death. Again groaning out:

"Oh God!"

And again God heard him; for death did not come. It was not the will of the All-Merciful.

The wolves suddenly ceased their snarling, and he reopened his eyes. He saw that they were drawing back, with shut jaws and tails drooping to the grass. When last seen they were scarce three feet from his face; they were now thrice the distance, and still increasing it!

They were not going hastily, or in wild scare. On the contrary, they moved slow and skulkingly, ceding the ground inch by inch, as if with reluctance, and a show of defiance.

What had caused the change in their attitude? What could it mean?

Clancy looked out over the plain, in front, to right, to left—as far as he could by the utmost wrenching of his neck. He saw nothing to give the explanation.

It might be behind; and he listened, conjecturing.

Why need he conjecture? He could have little doubt of what was affrighting the wolves. Darke had got over his scare; reflected, and was returning. The next scene in the tragedy would be its *finale*—the completion of that long-thwarted design—his own death.

Sure of this, Clancy but listened for the hoof-stroke of a horse.

He heard none; but instead, a different and softer sound. The hollow, cretaceous rock underlying the plain, acting as a conductor, carried it to his ears.

It resembled the pattering of paws, as of an animal running rapidly, but without horny hoof.

He had no time to think of what sort of animal it might be, till the sound appeared close behind his head.

Then a hot damp breath struck upon his brow, while something still warmer was laid against his cheek.

It was the tongue of a dog—his deer-hound!

"Thank Heaven!" was the exclamation that leaped from Clancy's lips.

He spoke it with as much grateful earnestness as if the animal had already released him from his earth-bound prison, so like to have been his grave.

The joyful emotion was but for a moment. It passed almost as soon as felt. What could the dog do for him?

Nothing. No good could come of its being there. True, it would hinder him from being torn by the coyotes. What of that? He must perish all the same.

While he thus reflected, the faithful creature continued to lick his brow, giving out a low fond whimpering, as when a child caresses its mother, with tender arms entwining her neck.

"Where can the dog have come from? They took him away. I saw him tied to one of their horses. Has he got loose, and scented back upon their trail? Or is some one with him, coming after? Might Jupiter—?"

Hope again dawning.

Again soon extinguished. No hoof-stroke, no foot-step of pedestrian, no sound of any one approaching! The first conjecture was the true one. The hound had escaped from its captors, and come back of its own accord. It was alone.

Again despairing, he turned his eyes upon the animal, still continuing its caresses.

"Brave Brasfort!" said he, giving the name bestowed in honor of the family with which he had hoped to be allied. "Dear, good dog! You have but come to see me die. You cannot save me. No, no. Yet it is something to have you beside me, like a friend by the death-bed! And you will protect me to the end. Ay, those horrid creatures—you will keep them off—that you will. Ah! you won't have to stand sentry long. I feel growing fainter—fainter. Good Brasfort! stay by me. When it's all over, you can go. I shall never see her more, but some one may find you. And she would reward you for this fidelity. I know she would. Stay close to me—lie down—down!"

Brasfort did not obey. He did not lie down. Neither did he continue his fond demonstrations. All at once he ceased caressing Clancy's head, and placed himself in an attitude, as if about to make an attack upon it.

Very different was the intent. The animal was but yielding to an ordinary canine instinct, as men call it; though dogs, could they speak, would tell us it is thought.

It looked like reasoning, when the great deer-hound, with a taint of terrier in its blood, commenced scratching up the earth around the neck of its master!

Once more the heart of that master throbbed with hope. Here was a chance of his being freed from his horrid confinement—one he had not thought of.

Inspired by it, he spoke to the animal, encouraging it with words well understood.

"Keep on, Brasfort! So, good fellow!"

"Chick—chick—chick! That's a brave fellow! Chick—chick—chick!"

The dog continued to claw and scrape out the earth, sending it in showers behind him. Despite the firmness with which it had been packed, he was fast opening a hollow circle around the shoulders of his master.

The right one was soon exposed above the surface. A little more removal of the mold, and the arm would be free! After that there would be but little difficulty in freeing the remainder of his body.

Still speaking words of encouragement, Clancy was beginning to congratulate himself upon escape—felt almost sure of it—when a sound reached his ear, once more bringing back despair.

It was the trampling of a horse—of a ridden horse—as he knew. As yet neither horse nor rider were in sight; but beyond doubt they were approaching the spot—coming up from behind.

It could be no other than Richard Darke, who had recovered from his fright; reflected, and was returning. He would act differently this time.

Clancy again fancied his end had come—the last hour of his life. And so near to being saved! A little longer, and Brasfort would have set him free! Too late—all too late! He must at length die!

Was there a hope he might relieve himself?

He made a desperate effort—giving an upward impulse to his body.

In vain! He was still held as in a vise, or with the weight of tons pressing upon him.

There was no alternative—he must submit to his fate.

Such a fate! He could see Richard Darke standing before him; hear his taunts and torturing speech; himself helpless! It would be almost a repetition of the scene under the cypress.

Even in that dread ultimate hour did Charles Clancy remember his humiliation!

He was not allowed long time to reflect on it. It but flashed across his brain as he listened to the tread of the advancing horseman, now nearly up.

Then a dark shadow shot over his head, that kept lengthening out before his face. With the moon far down, it was projected forward, till it assumed the shape of a horse, with a rider upon its back.

The dog suddenly left off scraping; and scampered off to meet the approaching horseman.

He met him, but without the savage growl his master expected to hear. Nor did the animal make other hostile demonstration. On the contrary, it was giving utterance to soft notes, whimperings that spoke of friendly recognition!

Something unexpected in this.

Clancy knew of the hound's antipathy to Darke; had heard of its trying to tear him. Could it then be he?

No! Altogether different was the horseman who, riding around his head, reined up in front of him.

Joy leaped into his heart, and sparkled in his eyes, as he beheld—Jupiter!

CHAPTER XVIII.

PURSUED BY A SPECTER.

If in wild terror Richard Darke ran away from what he believed to be a corpse, lying under the shadow of trees in a Mississippian forest, still more terrified was his retreat from what he fancied to be a specter, seen upon an open prairie of Texas. For to his own guilty conscience was now added the awe of the supernatural.

The head of the man he had murdered, rising out of the earth, his face seen in full moonlight, the eyes glaring upon him, the lips pronouncing his name, coupling it with his crime!

How could he be otherwise than awed?

And he was awed, palsied, almost stricken senseless with fear. No wonder he lost guidance of his horse, permitting the animal to go its own gait, and take its own way.

It, too, shared in the scare. The unnatural appearance of a head without a body, the proximity of wolves, the nervous shock felt by its rider, communicated to itself, the cry coming up from the earth, all combined to affright the steed as much as its master. From the weird spot it ran wildly away, as if the prairie were on fire, and the flames fast approaching.

And Darke rode it like a man drunk or under the influence of delirium.

For a time he made no effort to check his horse's speed, or in any way control it. It was as much as he could do to keep his seat in the saddle. His limbs felt weak, and his knees loose at the joints. His hands, too: the fingers nerveless, with scarce enough muscular strength to retain grasp of the reins.

His spirit was weakest of all, despite the heart strongly pulsing. This thundered against his ribs, as if struggling to burst from his breast.

His horse galloped on, he knew not, reeled not, whither. After the encounter with Simeon Woodley, so unexpected, so inopportune, he had been troubled with a presentiment of impending fate. But now that the other world had taken up the strife against him: now that its spirits were appearing—a ghost in earthly guise calling out his name and branding him with his guilt—it was no longer a presentiment, but a certainty. Too surely was Nemesis pursuing!

Utterly prostrated by the appalling thought, he permitted the horse to dash on. He did not even make an effort to retain his seat in the saddle; and, perhaps, would have fallen out of it, but for a long equestrian practice, that made the thing mechanical.

It was only when the animal, becoming tranquilized after its own scare, and blown by the burst of galloping, came to a stop, that the power of thought returned to him.

Then reflecting, or trying to reflect, he fancied himself dreaming. In his drunken slumber he had been dreaming—saw visions quite as strange as that—fearful phantasmagoria—groups, with Charles Clancy prominent among the fleeting figures!

Was he still asleep, and the sight of a bodiless head but a continuation of those terrible tableaux? Or was he awake, and—

"Oh God! I am awake. What can it mean? Am I mad?"

Thus spake the conscience-stricken criminal, after his horse had come to a halt, and he sat staring around him. He no longer knew where he was; and even doubted what he was!

For a time he kept his seat in the saddle, reflecting on the spectacle lately seen, and endeavoring to account for it. His steed, long famishing, had dropped its head, and commenced nibbling at the scant herbage.

The moon was still shining clear, but now nearer the horizon.

He faced round toward the direction whence he had come. He saw his own shadow, with that of his horse, projected far over the plain. That was the side on which he had seen the specter; and there lay his fear. Would the ghostly thing once more make its appearance? Would the head of Charles Clancy again rise out of the earth, and shout:

"Richard Darke—murderer!"

No—no—no! It had been all a fancy—a spell of delirium tremens—such as he had experienced before, more than once.

Glad to think it was but this, he dismounted, with the intention to stay there for the rest of the night. He could do no better, having now completely lost his way.

He was about drawing off the bridle, to give his hungry horse to the grass, when his glance was again directed along their shadows, now separated. With the moon close down to the horizon, both were thrown still further across the expanse of plain. And at the point where they terminated, just over his own head, he saw something not visible, or not noticed, by him before.

It was a mere speck, of darkish color. It might be a stunted tree, or rocky ledge, cropping above the general level.

One or other of these he had first fancied it to be, the fancy giving him satisfaction.

But as he continued to gaze upon it, he saw cause to think otherwise. It was neither rock, nor tree, nor anything fixed upon the plain, but something moving over it!

Gradually the shadow of his own head and the dark speck drew nearer one another; though it was not this that led him to think the latter was in motion. For the moon was still declining, and, of course, his own shadow becoming elongated in proportion. But just as the two came in contact, meeting upon the silvered surface of the prairie, there was a flash from the far-off form, as by the moonbeams reflected upon a bit of looking-glass.

More likely it was from the blade of a knife, or the barrel of a gun?

Thus did he interrogate himself about the shining object.

In either case there must be a man beside it?

And as he stood scrutinizing it, his eyes strained to their utmost, he made out the figure of a man, having a horse underneath him—in short, a horseman. And this horseman appeared to be heading toward himself, coming on at quick speed, as if prompted by some terrible determination!

To Richard Darke it seemed the Destroying Angel.

He did not stay to reflect further. Long before the approaching cavalier came near him, he gathered up his reins, sprang back into the saddle, and was spurring over the plain, as if his life depended upon speed!

And, in truth, so it did.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEATH-SHOT.

The joyous thrill that Clancy had experienced in seeing his hound, was slight compared with that felt on beholding the fugitive slave.

He expressed it in the words, "You, Jupiter!"

"It's me," said the mulatto, in response to his name being pronounced. "Yes, Masser Charles; an' so glad I've got here in good time. I war feared o' bein' too late; for I heard them say what they'd done to you. Well, thar's one o' that lot won't trouble you nor me no more. But what I talkin' 'bout, with you still in that fix? First I muss get you out, Masser Charles. Ho! the dog's been doin' it a'ready; good for the dear ole dog! Let's finish what he's begun."

Saying this, he drew out the blood-stained bowie, and with its blade commenced digging around the body of him he called master, at the same time scraping up the mold with one hand and flinging it backward.

It was but a short while till Clancy, released from his painful prison, saw his own shadow cast afar over the plain; now from head to foot, and not as before, only the head.

Jupiter's story was soon told; how he had humbugged the robber crew—these were his words—along with their big chief; not concealing the deed of blood necessary to secure his escape. Brasfort had brought him back along their trail; first to the lone tree, where the two parties separated. There the dog, greatly excited on the scent, had deserted him, and run forward alone. He had followed as fast as he could; but in the end was only groping his way. He had lost, and might not have found it, but for the wolves. Seeing them—their bodies looking big in the moonlight—he suspected what they were after; and advancing toward them, caught sight of the dog at some distance beyond. He saw that Brasfort was busy beside something, and surmised what it was.

This was the mulatto's tale.

For himself Clancy had none to tell, as Jupiter already knew all. He had no wish, now, to speak of the agonies he had endured, and no time. He had been listening impatiently to Jupiter's explanation, and could scarce wait for its end. His vengeance was still unsatisfied; his vow unfulfilled. The man who had made all his misery was still alive. He had but parted from the spot, and might be near. He could not be far off.

Whether near or far, he must be followed, and found.

With this thought impelling him, Clancy took hold of his horse; at the same time appropriating the arms Jupiter had stolen from the tents. As a strengthener, he availed himself of some whisky—the latter had also brought along.

Then springing into the saddle, and summoning Brasfort to follow, he said:

"You stay here, Jupe; or find your way back to the tree. When my work's finished, I'll come for you."

Without waiting a word of reply, he launched out over the plain; the hound following; the henchman in some surprise standing stiff and silent as a statue!

After parting with his faithful follower, Clancy rides at a quick canter. He had watched Darke as he went away, made note of the direction taken by him, and can do this for a short distance. He soon becomes uncertain; and must get guidance from something else. This is his hound, that hitherto trotting behind, now comes up, takes the trail, and glides on ahead of him.

As the scent is fresh, the dog readily lifts it, and goes on in a rapid run.

At like rate of speed Clancy keeps the horse, though not now going in a gallop. There is a gait that better suits his purpose; the "pace" peculiar to the steeds of the south—above all, those of Louisiana. Clancy's animal is a native of this State; and, therefore, a "natural pacer."

Never more than now had the movement stood its master in stead; for never, as now, did he require to make speed, combined with silence. And the gentle amble was just the thing for both. Darke, he believes, cannot be far ahead; but the hoof-stroke of a galloping horse would drive him still further; and this he must not hear. The "pace" will give him less chance of escape; a shorter warning that one is coming after him.

Going in this gait, Clancy's horse makes not much more noise than his hound. Both glide over the plain, silent as specters.

Nearly an hour passes without any result. But Clancy, having confidence in his canine guide, knows that he is going in the right direction. The behavior of Brasfort gives him assurance that he is not being led astray.

Before long the trust becomes verified. Although not in a direct line, the trail has hitherto conducted him toward that point of the plain where the declining moon appears about to sink into the earth's bosom. On—

lived, almost against her disk, he perceives a form, easily distinguishable as that of a man on horseback. Though athwart the moonbeams, and by their light magnified to gigantic size, he is not deceived. He has no thought of its being either giant or phantom.

For in like proportion the same light enlarges a plumed circlet around the horseman's head, the wearer of which he knows to be Richard Darke.

He no longer needs help from his hound. He must now put all trust in the heels of his horse.

"At last!" he says, in soliloquy, the words passing through closed lips and clenched teeth. "At length I have him in view; and, if I mistake not, within reach. Now, mother, you shall be avenged! Either that, or I shall soon join you!"

He has done with stealthy tracking, and resolves to ride straight on toward his enemy—to come up with, kill him, or be himself killed.

Next moment he is going at a gallop—in full stretch across the plain.

He sees that the other is galloping, too—evidently retreating.

It is a question of speed between the two horses, for the result of which Clancy has no fear. He has full confidence in the animal he bestrides; knows it to be of the swiftest. For these qualities had he chosen it before leaving the States; with anticipation that they might stand him in stead.

He has neither whip nor spur. If he had, there would be no need to use them. His horse sees the other horse ahead, divines the wish of his rider, and gallops as if ridden in a race.

On, over the moonlit plain, glide the two horsemen, as fast as their steeds can carry them.

Alike silent pursuer and pursued, but with reflections far different. The former knows who is before; the latter cannot tell who is following. He only has fears.

Richard Darke—for it is he who is chased—looks back with dread. He had again given way to fancying that he saw a spectral head—the head of him he had murdered. Now, it is the whole body—the complete ghost—that appears coming after him!

Driving the spurs still deeper into his horse's flanks, he gallops on, keeping a straight course. It is toward the moon, whose lower limb now impinges upon the plain.

He rides as if intending to plunge into her disk, and the seek safety from the unearthly pursuer.

But, ride as he will, he perceives that the latter is gaining upon him—gradually lessening the space between. He sees it with shuddering, with the faintness of despair.

Still galloping on, he surveys the ground in front—to right, to left, everywhere—in search of a place to conceal himself. The speed of his horse cannot serve him. He must seek safety under cover of some kind.

His glance sweeps the horizon in quest of trees. There are none on that sterile expanse—not so much as a shrub—only patches of artemisia, that would not give concealment to a hare.

In the last moments of his agony, something looms up in front, obscuring the light of the moon—for a moment concealing her disk. It has the outlines of a rock, rising above the level of the plain. It is a rock.

He heads toward it, spurring his horse to a last desperate effort.

He succeeds in reaching the rock, and getting on its further side.

There he halts, and awaits the coming up of the pursuer.

But, notwithstanding his wild terror, he has still resolution left to grasp his gun, and raise it in readiness. He will send a bullet through the thing approaching, whether it be the mortal man or spirit disembodied.

Stayed by no supernatural fancies, but urged on by human passions, Clancy continues the pursuit. His heart bounds with joy as he perceives the distance growing shorter between them. He will soon be able to satisfy the thirst that has so long tortured him. It is no mean selfish revenge that moves him, but a purer impulse—to mete out stern punishment and the justest retaliation.

Thus inspired, he presses desperately on.

He, too, appears as if about to plunge into that silvery circle whose circumference seems to rest upon the earth.

All at once the moon's disk disappears. Something coming between has screened it from his sight!

He sees that this is a rock—that the chased horseman has hidden himself behind it.

Notwithstanding his passionate impatience to kill Richard Darke, Clancy is checked in the pursuit. He is not so madly reckless as to give his enemy another chance of killing him.

Perceiving the advantage Darke has gained—his own danger if he go any nearer—he suddenly reins up. And not an instant too soon. He may already be within range of that gun whose barrel he sees glancing by the side of the rock.

While deliberating what to do, he is saluted by a speech:

"I don't know who, or what you are. But I warn you to come no nearer. If you do, by G—d—!"

Clancy, exasperated by the threat, does not wait for the speech to be finished. He shouts back:

"You red-handed ruffian! If you don't know who I am, you'll soon find out. I'm the man you thought you had murdered in a cypress forest in the State of Mississippi! The man who now intends killing you, in fairer fashion, upon a prairie of Texas. Richard Darke, if you have a prayer to say, say it soon! For, certain as you stand behind that rock, I intend giving you your death shot!"

The words produce a fearful effect on him to whom they are addressed. He had a belief that his pursuer might be Simeon Woodley; but it was not Woodley who spoke. The voice resembled that of Charles Clancy; and the words would identify him. But Clancy it cannot be—he is dead!

Again Darke fancies a ghost, the fancy appalling him. And still more that summons—stern, terrible, as if spoken by an avenging angel!

Is he still drunk, or dreaming?

His gun is gliding from his grasp. But, with a last desperate resolve, and an effort almost mechanical, he raises the piece to his shoulder, takes aim, and fires.

Clancy, waiting his reply, sees the flash, the jet, the white smoke puffing skyward; then hears the crack, and, along with it, the "zip" of a bullet, that passes close to his ear—too close for him to feel safe.

He remembers that Darke was accustomed to carry a double-barreled gun. The report is that of a smooth-bore. A second shot may be better aimed. He cannot return the fire with any chance of hitting his adversary.

The sheltering rock, the moon dazzling his eyes, everything is against him. And he has himself but one barrel—one bullet; it must not be idly spent.

There is no alternative but retreat to a safer distance, and there stay—holding his enemy in siege, until he can think of some scheme for dislodging him.

Wrenching his horse round, he rides off some paces, and again turns his face toward the rock.

There are the two men, both still seated in the saddle; one only seen by the other. And both now silent. After the short colloquy terminated by the shot—not another word passes between them.

Darke, reflecting, has somewhat recovered from his fright, at least so much of it as was due to the supernatural. After all Clancy may have survived the attempt on his life. Was it he who rescued Helen Armstrong under the oak?

It must have been Clancy! He is alive—it is he! At length does Darke leap to this conclusion.

It does not give him gladness. Nor relief of any kind.

The reality is as fearful as that fancied—not less foreshadowing his fate. Although no longer believing his pursuer a specter, he is, all the same, inspired with a presentiment of his death being near.

Simultaneously, Clancy is considering how to accomplish it; thinking of some plan to approach his skulking antagonist.

A yelp interrupts his cogitations. He turns hastily on hearing it. Brasfort is by his side. In the long chase—a trial of speed between two horses—the hound had fallen behind. The halt has enabled it to recover the distance, and rejoin its master.

Once by his side, the dog does not stay there. Instinct tells him the game is still ahead; and, after giving out that single note of greeting, he passes on in a straight run.

In ten seconds after, he disappears behind the rock. Clancy, listening, hears what causes him to loosen his bridle-rein and ride rapidly in the same direction, tightening the grasp on his gun.

Darke sees the hound coming up, under the moonlight, and plainly remarks its markings; remembers, too, how it had set upon him under the cypress tree, there savagely assailing him. Nemesis, with all the hosts of hell, seems surely let loose upon him!

The hound is soon by his side, and its hostility in the Mississippian forest was naught to that shown now. It springs at him like a panther, open-mouthed; at his legs, as they hang dangling down by the horse's side.

In an instant its fangs are fixed in his calves, causing him to shriek with affright, as with pain.

He struggles to shake the animal off, to kill it—at the same time endeavoring to keep under cover of the boulder.

But his horse, sharing his affright, no longer obeys the rein; and, prancing about, soon parts from the rock, exposing his rider.

Clancy, coming up, sees his advantage; and raises his rifle, quick as for the shooting of a snipe. The clear crack follows; and simultaneous with it, Richard Darke drops out of the saddle and falls face foremost on the plain.

He makes no attempt to rise—no struggle—no movement of any kind, beyond a slight convulsive tremor, soon terminating in stillness—the stillness of death. Beyond doubt, he has received what was promised him—his death-shot.

Clancy, dismounting, advances toward the fallen foe. At first hastily, to hinder the dog from tearing him, which the animal seems determined to do.

After chiding it off, he approaches the prostrate form, slowly, and in silence. There is no need for speech, neither taunt nor recrimination, now. He sees that his enemy has ceased to live; and that before him is but a breathless body—a lump of senseless clay—all the passions that inspired it, bad and good, gone to be balanced elsewhere.

For a time he stands contemplating it, but without show of either triumph or exultation. Then, curiosity prompting him, he stoops down to see where his bullet has hit. To do this he has to turn the body on its back; an act he performs gently, and without rudeness. He has no desire to insult the dead.

Nor does he gloat over the features of the fallen man, as, exposed to the full moonlight, they appear in death's pallor. He sees enough without this to satisfy, almost make him shudder. Justice has had requital, and he has no vengeance now.

Giving but a glance to the face, he bends low over the body, and looks for the wound. He soon discovers it, and says, speaking to himself:

"In the breast, as I supposed—just where he shot me, but with a different result. Well; that is scarcely a coincidence, for I aimed to hit him there. I feel sad to think of it; but I know God will forgive me for riding the world of such a wicked wretch."

Then standing erect, with eyes upraised, in the same attitude as when over his mother's grave, and in like solemn tone, he added:

"I've kept my vow. Mother, thou art avenged!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE PIRATES IN PERIL.

On the far frontier of Texas, still unsettled by civilized man, no chattering gives note of the dawn. Instead, the *meleagris* salutes the sunrise with a cry equally strident; and if not so melodious, quite as homelike. For the "gobbling" of the wild turkey-cock is scarcely distinguishable from that of his tame brother of the British farmyard.

A "gang" of these great birds, that had roosted in the pecan grove near the spot where the pirate pirates were encamped, seeing the daylight approach, flew up to the tops of the trees; the males, as is their wont in the spring season of the year, mutually sounding their sonorous challenge.

It awoke the robbers from the slumber that had succeeded their drunken debauch—their chief first of any.

Despite the confusion of a brain filled with the fumes of alcohol, Borlasse had a conception that things were not right. He showed this by rushing out of his tent, and calling first for the mestizo; then quickly after inquiring for the mulatto.

The interrogatory, uttered in loud, earnest voice, rung through the encampment. It was heard by all, though no one made answer to it. They only repeated it in like earnest tone.

Then, simultaneously, ascended the shout, "Gone!" accompanied by loud talk, mingled with much profane swearing.

As yet the robbers only spoke in conjecture. No one was sure that the mestizo was not there, or that the mulatto was missing. It was known that the two half-

breeds shared a little tent standing apart. Both might be inside it, asleep?

A rush toward it; a man stooping, and looking into it; then an exclamation that drew the others around, who stood listening for the explanation.

It quickly came.

The mestizo was indeed inside the tent, lying along its floor; not asleep, but dead; with blood—his own blood—in streams, in pools, half-liquid, half-coagulated around him!

The mulatto was not there. The only sign of his having been there was the gory corpse under their eyes. That was enough. Only the other half-blood could have left such sanguinary traces behind.

"Where was he?"

This was the unanimous inquiry.

A voice answered, saying:

"He's gone off; an's taken the dog along! Likely, too, one of the horses!"

There was a rush toward the corral, where the latter were kept.

On nearing it, they saw that the inclosure was empty. Not a horse inside; not even the mule, which the mulatto had been riding when made prisoner. All this was now nothing to surprise them. They expected it.

On reaching the entrance they perceived that the bars were down, and the horses had got out.

They were, no doubt, near at hand.

Any anxiety on this score was soon set at rest. The animals were found tranquilly browsing on a bit of meadow grass that skirted the creek. They were all there, the mule among them, seemingly as much at home as any.

One only was missing—that which had belonged to the man left in the prairie stocks—to Charles Clancy. It was a splendid charger, to which the chief had taken a fancy, and appropriated to himself. To him the loss of the horse was nothing compared with the escape of the prisoner. With a subtle cunning, he at once perceived the danger thus drawn upon him and his band. The mulatto had been witness to their transformation from Indians to white men. He would find his way to the settlement, and tell what he had seen to the settlers. Certain to do this—certain, also, to guide them to the rendezvous, the way to it being now known to him. Moreover, he might be in time to rescue Clancy from the living tomb to which he, Borlasse, with too much confidence in the security of the place, had consigned him.

The chief of the outlawed crew cared not so much for this. His foiled spite against Clancy, he could endure far better than the thought of that other passion still unsatisfied. She with the glowing cheeks and golden tresses was not yet in his arms, as he had fondly, surely, expected. It now looked as if she never would be.

Again reviewing his mischances, the brutal ruffian heaved what might have been intended for a sigh. It came from the bottom of his brawn chest, resembling the snort of a bear. For all this it expressed a passion, so strong, so profoundly felt, that he would have risked everything—the plunder late acquired—even life itself—to gratify it.

Where were Quantrell and Bosley? He could not tell, or think. Quantrell should have been able to find his way back to the rendezvous. If not Bosley would; being an older member of the band, and better acquainted with their "stamping-ground."

Had Quantrell, *alias* Darke, turned traitor to them, and was keeping the captives for himself? Had he taken them in some other direction, Bosley being bribed to assist him? He had money enough for this, and it might be, that, parting with the rude robber fraternity, he had made up his mind to give his old comrades the slip.

Or was Darke dead, Clancy having killed him? And Bosley, too—the captives at the same time rescued, and restored to their home?

This was Borlasse's original conjecture, again repeated. But now, with more belief in its being the correct one. For now, he knew that Clancy had deceived him, the mulatto more. The cunning shown by the latter in effecting his escape, was evidence that his whole story was a lie.

Borlasse chafed at the cheat he felt certain had been practiced upon him. Growling like a grizzly bear, he strode through the tents, calling upon his comrades to make ready for instant departure from the place.

He proposed going back across the upper plain, and if need be, on to the valley of the San Saba. The object, to find Quantrell, Bosley, and the captives.

A proposition to which his fellow freebooters would not listen. What cared they for Phil Quantrell? And what for Bill Bosley? As for the petticoats they'd find plenty of such in San Antonio, whither they were all bound. They had now the wherewithal to get sweethearts at will, without stealing them; and what was the use of going after a couple of dainty damsels that were unwilling? They couldn't all have them anyhow; and didn't see why they should risk their necks for any two men in particular. For to go back over the upper plain would be doing this. The escaped prisoner would be sure to reach the settlement, and bring the d—d settlers upon them. They might meet these on the way, and find them too strong? They might lose not only the cash they had succeeded in securing, but their lives into the bargain?

Even at that moment, they might be in danger? The mulatto, mounted as he was, would soon reach the settlement, and bring back the outraged colonists, quickened to pursuit by the outrage perpetrated upon them.

Therefore, with unanimous voice, the robbers pronounced for at once striking tents, and making for San Antonio.

And instead of going across the upper plain, and through the San Saba bottom, to keep down the creek, and on by the valley of the Colorado.

To combat this course of action, Borlasse had to use all his authority as chief, with such rough eloquence as he could command.

"Boys," he said, "it'll be the same in the end. We'll get safe enough to San Antonio, and have our spree out when we get there. But that kin be no danger about our proceedin' across the upper plain. We needn't if you say no, keep on as far as the San Saba. I reckon we'll meet Phil Quantrell somewhere before we get that far. If we don't, then let him look out for hisself. But we ought to remember that he's been with us and air one o' us. It ain't right to give him up without makin' a effort to find him. All I ask o' ye is to go back over the plain till we come to the big tree. If we don't meet him by the time we get there, then we can strike for the Colorado, without going any nearer to San Saba. Not far from the tree, as you all know, we planted a

sapling in the ground. I'm curious to see if 't be there still, and if it's growin'. Besides, I've got an idea that we'll find the nigger near it, whether it be living or dead. If we should, there'll be an opportunity to punish him for what he's done, and give the ghost of Fernand here some chance o' sleepin'. Anyway, we must, if possible, prevent the mulatto from gettin' to the mission, or it'll make things ugly for us after. I reckon you can all see that?

They all could, and did. None of them cared any great deal as to what became of Phil Quantrell, and his captives, and as little about the after-fate of Charles Clancy. They were equally indifferent about avenging the death of their comrade. They were even about to go off without giving burial to his body!

But the words of Borlase sounded very differently when he talked to them of their own safety. They all saw the danger of their escaped prisoner getting into communication with the colonists. He must, if possible, be recaptured.

Influenced by this idea, they no longer opposed the wishes of their leader; but gave quick consent to them. A hurried breakfast, with a big drink to wash it down, was the prelude to their departure.

Then their animals were caught, caparisoned, and again laden with the silver; this no longer in barrels,

danger in what they had been doing; and riding straight back to the scene of their crime did not look like taking proper precautions to escape its consequences. Why, then, should they go that way, when another and safer was open to them? By turning to the left, and proceeding down the Colorado, there would be no likelihood of encountering anyone, much less a party of pursuers. And as they had now got all they wanted—cash enough to give them the grandest spree they had ever entered on—why not at once make for San Antonio, and see it out, without further anxiety or trouble?

To the pleasant programme there was one who would not accede, or even listen—this one, their chief.

Borlase was not satisfied to let things end that way. Mad about money as any of his men, and glad as they at having gotten it, he was still more mad at Jessie Armstrong having escaped him, and determined, if possible, to have her back. He would risk anything for that.

On this account did he oppose the wishes of his followers, with all the warmth of his anger and eloquence.

When other arguments had been used, all proving idle, he said:

"Well, boys, you may have your own way, as you seem bent upon it. But if ye do, all I've got to say is,

If Quantrell and Bosley, with the girls, don't turn up meantime, we'll have to let them slide. For if that Charley Clancy's escaped, then I can tell you we've got to look out for squalls. I've had to do with him of old, as some o' ye know. I only feel now what a d-d fool I've been for the frolic of half-buryin' him in the ground, instead of puttin' him clear under, head and all, when we were about it. He mayn't be alive by this; and if not, so much the better. Then there is only the yellow-skin to fear, an' him we may again get hold o', if we go back that way, and quick enough. Now?"

Borlase's reasoning had its effect on his fellow-robbers, most of them assenting to what he said.

It was now clear to all the mistake they had made in capturing Clancy and his follower, or rather in allowing the mulatto to get off again. They should either have given the two men a wide berth and let them alone—which, disguised as Indians they could have done—or, after encountering them, they should have put it beyond their power to tell tales.

Thus reasoned they, under the belief that their incognito was still safe, and that the mulatto alone knew of their masquerading.

Things wore a serious aspect. Their escaped prisoner, though he might be a slave, was evidently no common man. The mode of his escape, with the bleed-



HAND TO HAND.

but stowed away in saddle-bags, bullet-pouches, and pockets.

When all was ready, they sprung into their saddles, and rode off, just as day was dawning upon the valley.

The tents were left standing, in one of them the dead body of the half-blood, still unburied, lying in its gore!

As they entered the gorge, and commenced ascending toward the superior plain, the wild turkeys again gave out their sonorous notes—now with no human ear to hear them!

CHAPTER XXI.

STRIKING FOR THE TREE.

AFTER reaching the table plain, and before they had set their faces to cross it, the desperadoes drew up.

It was a pause for a fresh parley between the men and their chief. They were again mutinous; and instead of keeping straight on, expressed their desire to take a different direction. Their doubts about the prudence of crossing the plain had returned in fuller force.

This dissidence was the cause of their halting, till the point should be settled. All or most of them were now dead against the plan laid before them by their leader.

Partially recovered from the effects of their night's revelry, their heads had become clearer, while their courage was proportionately weakened through the reaction of overstrained nerves. They knew there was

that way will be likely to get your necks into the noose of a rope—every one of them.

"How?" was the unanimous interrogatory.

"How! Ye must be a set o' blind boobies, if ye don't see how. You all know the nigger's gone off, and will be sure to make his way to the settlements. Belike, he'll put straight for the San Saba Mission lot. Whether there or elsewhere, he's sure to tell all about us, and our doings, the which he knows too well. What then? Can a man of ye afterward show his face anywhere within the borders of civilization, without bein' instantly tuk up? Now what do ye all think of it?"

To this question the robbers could make no reply. It came upon them with a quick shock of surprise, being a forecast of the future they had not hitherto contemplated, or dreamt of. They only answered interrogatively, one saying:

"What would you have us do?"

"Go back over the plain," was the rejoinder of Borlase. "Leastwise, as far as the tree; and from there we can deviate to the place whar we put Mr. Charley Clancy in the prairie stocks. If we find him still there, then it'll be all right; for we'll be sure o' findin' the yellow fellar along with him. If both be gone, I'm agreeable to our going that way no further, but making tracks in any other direction as seems best; and the sooner we start in some other direction, the safer for us.

ing corpse left behind, bespoke courage, cleverness, and resolution; qualities that would not only insure the finding his way out of the wilderness, but enable him, after reaching the settlements, to raise a strong hue and cry against them.

The more the outlaws reflected upon these things, the more apprehensive they became; some already wishing themselves on the southern side of the Rio Grande, despite the attractions of San Antonio.

Again came the interrogatory, what had they best do? And again their chief made answer, pointing out his old plan of action in more detail, but now without the need of any syllogism to support it.

"Comrades," he said, "ye see that we're in a bit of a fix—all o' us alike. And tharfor let's all work together to get out of it. Like as not the yellow skin is within less than ten miles of where we're here sittin' in our saddles. My conjecture is that he'd first go to where we left Clancy. If so 'twould take him some time to find the place—more especially in the night time. As ye know, he wasn't there hisself; only at the lone tree. And no doubt he'll strike first for that, which he mayn't find so soon or so easy. Whar he planted Clancy air nigh two mile beyond, and to the mulatto that'll be all gropin'. The hound may gie him a help, and from what we see'd o' that animal, more'n likely it will. Still, it'll take a goodish while for 'em to get sight o'

Clancy's cocoa-nut, whether the coyotes hev had their teeth in it or not. And then there'd be the diggin' o' him out, if alive and worth diggin' out; and anyway, the nigger 'll hev to come back by the tree, or get stuck at the big gulch that crosses the plain beyond. Seein' as he couldn't 'a' left the camp much afore mornin', and takin' his other difficulties into the account, I reckon there'll still be a chance o' catchin' up with him. By ridin' straight on to the tree we may thar intercept him. Boys! that's the best we can do for our own salvation. I needn't repeat that things look ugly, an' if we don't take some steps they'll soon look a darned sight uglier. Shall we strike for the tree?"

A unanimous answer in the affirmative.

"Then let's ride quick. If we intend catchin' up with yellow skin, thar ain't a second's time to be spared. By overtakin' him it'll be all right yet. If we don't, there'll be no goin' on by the Colorado. No, by the Eternal G—d! The sooner we put up for some crossin' on the Rio Grande, the safer for the necks o' all o' us!"

Assent to the words spoken, prompt, unanimous, decisive. After which the desperadoes, turning to the lone tree, dimly visible in the distance, started off toward it with fear on their faces, and not much hope in their hearts.

One and all, their souls stained with crime, and their conscience, guilt-laden, were oppressed with a pre-sence of evil.

CHAPTER XXII. THE AVENGERS EN ROUTE.

At the same hour, almost the same minute, when Borlase and his mounted freebooters were climbing up from a creek of the Colorado, another party of horsemen was ascending out of the valley of the San Saba, their intent also to reach the upward plain. And when they had reached it, they, too, paused upon its edge; showing a troop of over thirty in number.

These were not thieves, but honest men; being the party of pursuers from the San Saba settlement, under the leadership of the young planter, Dupre, with the hunters Woodley and Hawkins acting as its guides.

Almost simultaneously did both troops arrive on the plateau edge; at the same time making stop. And when so halted, there were still twenty miles between them—twenty miles of dry desert, trackless and treeless, here and there only a scattering of cactus plants, a clump of thorny mezquite trees, or a stiff yucca, the *palmilla* of the Mexicans, and "Spanish bayonet" of the Anglo-Americans. The only tree of large dimensions seen over the sterile expanse, was that already known as a landmark on the route to the robbers' rendezvous, toward which the colonist party was now proceeding.

On reaching the desert plain, as already said, Dupre and his people made stop. Only for a short while, and not because they were in doubt about the direction in which they should go. They were not staying to take up tracks, for they had no need. There was one with them who well knew the way; and, *volens volens*, was conducting them along it.

Reluctantly or not, Bosley had turned traitor to his old associates; and told his new ones all, not only about the burglary, but other crimes of which his late confederates had been guilty during some three years' brigandizing in Southwestern Texas.

By his confession it came out, that several cases of murder and maraud upon the people of the frontier settlements, supposed to have been done by Indians, were in reality the work of these white freebooters, acting under the Indian disguise; and so not only escaping detection themselves but very nearly embroiling the State in a war with the Comanches, who had been accused of these crimes.

Their tactics, though astute, were in reality simple enough, both as to design and execution. They were similar to those they had just made use of in their descent upon the new colony; though it was not often they had the opportunity of such a grand *coup* as the capturing of fifty thousand dollars in cash. More frequently their booty was a few score or hundred horses, which they would "run" off over the Rio Grande, and there sell to Mexican confederates. With the proceeds they would return to Texas, generally to its chief city, San Antonio, and there stay till the gambling-tables and debauchery made it necessary for them to replenish their exchequers by a fresh stroke of horse-stealing, or aught else that turned up—high-way robbery if need be.

Most of these men professed the calling of the *mustanger*—that is, the catching of wild horses, breaking and bringing them to the settlements for sale. There are many who thus make their living in Texas, and honestly too. But, with the band of Borlase, this was only a blind; all of them being robbers of the truest type, and not a few red-handed murderers.

Their principal place of rendezvous was that already described, on a creek emptying into the Colorado. To it they were in the habit of returning after an expedition of plunder; taking the proceeds along, and there distributing them. There they kept their masquerading costumes; using it as a dressing-room, before making their appearance upon the stage, which more than once they had left saturated with blood.

All this admitted Bosley; the truth having been extracted by one who stood the while holding a pistol close to his skull. Sime Woodley it was who had thus forcibly confessed him.

And when the pursuing party reached the upper plain, and Bosley seemed to show reluctance about proceeding, that same pistol was again presented to his head, Sime saying:

"Bill Bosley, altho' I don't make estimat' o' yur life as any more account than that o' a cat, or a cur, I'll a' s'pose it's precious to you. Now, ye kin save it. But only on one condishun; which be, that you take us, strait surtain, to the place whar Jim Borlase an' his beauties ar. Show sign o' purvaricatin', or go a yard's length o' the right track, an'—wal; I won't threaten to shoot ye, as I'm doing now; but I promise you'll get your neck stretched on the nearest tree, an', if thar arn't none, I'll hang ye at the tail o' my horse. So take yer choice; an' ef ye want ter chaw any more corn, don't try to play treetur."

"I've no such intention," protested the man thus menaced. "Indeed, no. Not a thought of it, Mr. Woodley. I was only studying what way we should take from here. For, to tell the truth, tho' I've crossed this plain several times, 'twas always along wi' the others, and I didn't make note o' the direction. One thing I remember. After getting out a bit on the plain, there's a tree comes in sight. The road leads right past that. The tree's about half distance toward the creek; but when I get to it, I reckon I can find the other half easier, by some mezquite bushes that stand here and there. Don't disbelieve me, Mr. Woodley. I acknowledge I've

been a bad 'un; but you needn't have any fear of me turnin' traitor to you."

"I've no fear of ye," rejoined the hunter, with a contemptuous toss of the head. "All I've got to say is, that if yur story don't prove strait, thar'll be a crik in your neck soon's it's diskivered to be crooked. So waste no more time palaverin' but strike out the way ye think likeliest for sightin' the tree spoke o'."

The alacrity which Bosley now displayed was proof that he had no intentions to deceive those he was conducting. Not likely, since he knew his neck depended on his proving true. Not only Woodley, but the others were well watching him; all interested in the result—all of them feeling it an affair of their own. For although the only real sufferer was Dupre, who had lost both slaves and cash, his fellow-colonists were angry at the outrage, and equally resolved upon castigating those who had committed it. The young planter had torn himself from the side of his *fiancee*, now restored and safe. His creole blood was up: roused by the treason of his late trusted steward as much, if not more, than by the loss of his fifty thousand dollars. Determined to chastise the recreant scoundrel, he was impatient to keep on.

During the night the pursuers had been delayed, groping their way along dark woodland paths.

But as daylight was now around, and they had arrived upon the upland plain, where there were no shadows to retard their progress, all were shouting "On!"

The only cause of delay, was in discovering the right trail—that taken by the retreating robbers.

But soon they were upon it. Bosley struck straight out into the plain, at first going by guess. Woodley and Hawkins could have helped him, but for the ground being trampled over by the tracks of mustangs, a drove of which had passed that way the day before; going at a headlong gallop, as the two hunters could tell. Transversely was the trail of the retreating freebooters, which they could also see, but so confused as to take up too much time in the lifting. They preferred leaving it alone, and looking out for the tree of which Bosley had admonished.

It was not long before their eyes became gratified with the sight of it, standing solitary, afar off, against the line of the horizon. It appeared to be upon the summit of a swell, that rose above the general level of the plain.

Simeon Woodley was the first to discover it. On sighting it, he cried out, addressing himself to the whole cavalcade:

"Thar it air, fellurs, an' no mistake. Tharfor I reck'n the skunk's been tellin' us the truth. Sure as a gun air iron, yonner stick o' branchin' timmer air the beekun that's guided Borlase an' his beauties. Ef my recol-leckshun sarve me right, I've heern o' that finger-post afore; and I guess I know pretty near the place whar it points to. Le's go right on to it, and then we'll see what furrer progress kin be made. I guess thar won't be no great defequilty, as beyont, Bill Bosley says he's better aknowledged wi' the way. Anyhow, le's strike for the tree, an' as thar's no need any longer ducky'n our heads to diskiver a trail, we kin make a leetle better time. We need to. For ef we don't, them berr'ls o' silver may get scattered, an' 'twon't be so dodrotted eazy to rekvier 'em. Besides, we moun't be able to g'e punishment to the scoundrels as carried 'em off. But, boys, that ain't all," and here Sime's voice rose to a higher pitch, at the same time assuming a more serious and solemn tone; "thar's somethin' else to be thought o'; somethin' o' more importance than eyther stolen silver or the punishment o' them as hev stole 't. Thar's a man's life in danger; one that's dear to me, as I reck'n he would be to all o' ye, ef ye knew him as I do. Ye heerd what the ole kurnel sayed whiles we war startin'; that, *cost what it mout, Charley Clancy war to be saved!*"

As the backwoodsman, in his rough way, repeated the words of Colonel Armstrong, they were hailed, as before, by a burst of enthusiasm. All on the ground gave echo: that, if living, Clancy should be rescued, and if dead revenged.

"All right, kumrades!" cried Woodley. "I see you're in airmest, and thar won't be no sech word as fail. As to them we're arter, I reck'n we'll soon git sight on 'em, and then—But come; we must stop dawdlin' hyar. Time's preeshus; so g'e the prod to yer critters, and le's striko deereet for yonner tree!"

So speaking, the hunter led off, the others following, as if his proposal were a command not to be disobeyed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BESIDE THE FALLEN FOE.

To return to Charles Clancy, left beside the body of his fallen foe.

He does not design to tarry long there. The companionship of the dead is ever painful even when an enemy. With no one near, it may be appalling.

Something of this creeps over Clancy's spirit as he stands regarding the corpse. For he has now no passion to sustain him—not even anger. His vow is fulfilled—his vengeance satisfied; and his heart left there to throb with the gentler pulsations of humanity, as is its wont.

A shudder passes through his frame as he gazes upon Darke's features—scowling even in death. In spite of their sinister aspect, he feels sad while contemplating them. He wishes it had been otherwise, and that the terrible retribution had been spared him. But it could not. It has been forced upon him; and let that be the end of it.

With this reflection justifying himself, he turns his back upon the corpse, calling Brasfort away from it. The dog still exhibits hostility to the dead man, and would mutilate his body if permitted. The savage canine instinct has no generous impulse to appease it, and only yields to stern words and gestures of menace. Clancy mounts his horse, intending to proceed in search of Jupiter.

But before he can part from the spot, he sees some one advancing toward him, who must be the mulatto. The individual approaching is on foot. This assists Clancy in his surmises, while the gait helps to the identification of Jupiter.

It is he, and his story, though scarce needing it, is soon told.

He had been following the chase, afoot.

The clear moonlight had enabled him to do this, as also the pace, necessarily slow, from Clancy having waited for the hound to do its work. Jupiter had lost sight of his master after Darke came in view, and commenced that straight run leading on to the rock.

Though neither pursued nor pursuer was any longer visible, the mulatto had continued traveling toward the point where they had disappeared.

But, while thus uncertainly advancing, he heard

sounds that better directed him—shots. Making note of the quarter whence they seemed to come, he had renewed his bearings, and with all haste kept on. He knew that where the shots had been heard he would find a dead body. It might be that of his master, or his master's enemy. He could not know which; but he had his hopes, based upon that which gave him confidence. The last shot he heard had the sharp crack of a rifle!

Without this, he would have been equally confident of the result.

His master's words, spoken at parting, had so inspired him.

He had taken note of Clancy's strength and determination. There was something in the air, a speaking electricity, that told him the child of God would triumph, and he of the Devil be discomfited.

As through the morning haze he beheld a horseman, he knew it was Charles Clancy. And, by his seat in the saddle, he could tell his young master was triumphant; and that he had completed the purpose for which he had so determinedly started off.

A very few seconds suffice for Jupiter's explanation. For Clancy none is needed. His tale is told without words; by that gory corpse seen stretched along the sward.

Jupiter, seeing it, glides up and stands over, gazing down upon it.

Some strange reflections the spectacle must surely afford him? As he looks upon the stiff, outstretched arms, lying helpless along the grass; the hands, with fingers curving like claws, now nerveless; he may be thinking how these once clutched a cowhide, that cut into his own back, and there left weals still painfully discernible!

But he says nothing; and in silence waits, till his master summons him away.

For a time the two stay under the shadow of the rock, deliberating what to do. It is but a question as to their mode of making journey. Jupiter is afoot, and will have to travel as a pedestrian, thus retarding both. No!

Something seen has called forth the negative.

It is a riderless horse, galloping over the plain. He is not going in any direct course, but careering about in circles or spiral curves, the rock appearing to be the pivot. They see that he carries both saddle and bridle, the latter trailing.

There is no mystery either about the animal's presence or its actions. Clancy knows that the empty saddle has lately been occupied by him who lies dead.

His only thought is how to get possession of the steed, and make it available for mounting the mulatto.

This purpose is followed by immediate action; which ends in the capture of the riderless horse.

Easily enough is the creature taken. Not accustomed to be alone, after a turn or two upon the open plain, it trots back to the spot where it has lost its rider; there delivering itself up to him who had lightened it of its load.

And soon another is upon its back—a heavier weight for the runaway slave was a larger man than his former master, and freedom has increased his corpulence.

Clancy, conscious his task is ended, now only thinks of making way to the mission. But not with incautious haste. Too much of this has he already reason to repent. And there is still probable peril to be encountered. Jupiter's escape from the desperadoes is not likely to be without results. They may come after, in hopes of re-capturing him. And they would come that way, in the belief that he will in all likelihood make back for the place where his master has been left.

This is the spot now to be avoided. Where is it?

Clancy casts his eyes inquiringly over the plain. His chase after Darke has carried him several miles, during which he has taken no note of the direction. The determination to overtake his enemy, before again losing sight of him, blinded him to all else. Where then is that spot, so long his place of torture?

The position he occupies is favorable for observation. The rock itself rests upon the summit of a ridge—the "divide" between the two great rivers—this trending for many miles, longitudinally, with a sharply defined crest that resembles the combing of a sea-wave. It is one of those formations, in French trapper phraseology called *coleau de prairie*.

On each side the surface slopes gently down, till it reaches the general level, the whole eminence having a breadth of some two or three miles.

Clancy commands a view of the plain on both sides of it as far as vision can extend. The sun's position in the sky gives him a clue to the points of the compass, as also the direction in which lie the two rivers.

As he continues attentively to interrogate the surrounding scene, an object comes under his glance, at once fixing it.

It is a tree, tall, and of peculiar shape, that stands upon the crest of the ridge, just within sightin' distance of the rock. He thinks he remembers it. So think's Jupiter, and gazing at it, both become sure.

It is the same that guided the freebooters retreating laden with their spoil.

Later, it has similarly served the mulatto, on his retreat from the robbers' den.

Clancy can now determine the place where he had been planted. It is on the opposite side of the tree, from where they now are—it may be two miles. In his chase after Darke he had passed that solitary landmark without seeing it; and Jupiter gliding after, had done the same.

Continuing his survey, Clancy makes himself yet more familiar with the topography of the plain; sees the direction he ought to take, as also that to be shunned.

Unfortunately they are the same. To strike for the tree will put him on the trail leading to the San Saba. But it may also bring him in contact with the desperadoes should they be coming back that way.

If he should again get into their hands he can have no doubt as to the result. To him, as also to his faithful follower, certain death, and no doubt also cruel torture.

Such a catastrophe is not only still possible, but probable, should they attempt returning upon the trail. It is now broad daylight, and a horseman traversing that treeless expanse could be seen to the verge of vision.

Clancy once more on his own splendid charger, needs not to have fears for himself. It is again about his follower he is apprehensive; for Jupiter, though mounted better than before, would still run the risk of being retaken.

Under the circumstances circumspection is necessary, and the utmost caution called for.

How are they to act? Clancy can tell the direction

in which lies the San Saba. The ascending sun gives the clue to this. They may strike straight for the river, but not for the gorge going down to the bottom. Once on the bluff they can keep along it till they come to the sloping descent.

Even then the freebooters may descry them from afar, and riding rapidly, intercept them before they can reach the ravine. In this course there will be a risk. It seems too dangerous to be attempted.

One other is open—to keep all day under cover, and at night continue their journey.

This can be done with fair prospect of safety. The bowlder, big as a house or hay-stack, rises to the height of twenty feet, extending twice that horizontally. Not only a single horseman or two, but a whole troop could be screened behind it. Clancy sees that they can stay there without any risk of being observed, taking the ordinary precautions to keep on the lee side of danger.

And now there is no great reason for his hurrying on to the San Saba settlement. Before, he had his fears, even the worst. When Borlase hissed those harsh words into his ear, he did not know that they were untrue. He could not. Darke might have ridden back into the river bottom, met Borlase and the band, pursued Woodley, and retaken the captives. Or, even had these succeeded in safely reaching the mission, what might they have found there? The whole body of the colonists massacred? The desperadoes were capable of doing this. The behavior to himself was proof of it. Helen Armstrong might return to stand, with heart torn, beside a dead father, as he, Clancy, had done, over the grave of a murdered mother!

These thoughts had troubled him while standing interred to the neck, buried alive, as he then believed himself to be.

He is no longer a prey to such terrible prognostications. Jupiter has dispelled them, by knowledge acquired during his short period of captivity; and Clancy now knows that Colonel Armstrong is still alive; feeling equally sure that his daughters have rejoined him.

He longs to be there too, and have a share in the general joy. How pleasant it will be to take departure from that spot, leaving dark death behind, and set his face toward bright life—the brightest and sweetest that ever met man! For Helen Armstrong, with open arms, will be waiting to receive and welcome him. The long night of their sorrowing has passed. The morn of their joy is to come, and soon—its daylight is already dawning. A short journey to be made, and he will stand by the side of his beloved, his betrothed; once more enfold her in his arms; once more exchange love speeches, kisses sweeter still—ah!

His rapture is interrupted; the bright dream becoming suddenly shadowed as when a cloud drifts across the disk of the sun. And it is the sun that does it—the reflection of its light from something seen far off upon the plain. The returning rays flash back not from a single point, but several, these appearing separate yet close to each other.

Experienced in prairie signs, Clancy has no difficulty in reading this. The glancing coruscations are the glint of gun-barrels, pistol-butts, bowie-knives, belts, and stirrups. Against a dark background they shine conspicuously; this soon becoming distinguishable as a body of mounted men.

They are coming from the side of the Colorado; though it needs not the direction to identify them. Soon as setting eyes upon the troop, Clancy is convinced of its character.

Beyond doubt the desperadoes!

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRIENDS AND FOES.

SOME paces apart from the rock, Clancy is seated in his saddle, the mulatto, also mounted, alongside of him. They have been on horseback during their cogitation, as to what course they should take. Soon as seeing the far-off cohort, and recognizing it as the robber-band, Clancy draws his horse behind the bowlder, directing Jupiter to do the same.

Thus screened, they can see the approaching party, without being themselves seen.

Is it approaching?

This is the question to be determined, and at once. For if so their only chance for safety will be in the swiftness of their horses; since the rock can only conceal them till the robbers get up to it.

For better concealment they dismount, Jupiter holding the horses, while Clancy fixes his eyes upon the moving band; taking care that as much of his head, as must needs be shown, shall appear but a projecting part of the bowlder. A blanket, hastily snatched from Darke's saddle-croup, enables him thus to simulate.

Only for a short while is he in doubt about the direction in which the horsemen are proceeding.

They are not riding toward the rock, but in a direct line for the ridge—at right angles, as if intending to cross it. They appear to be heading straight for the tree, no doubt, afterward to go on to the place he, Clancy, has such reason to remember.

He breathes freely. Unless something should cause them to deflect from their line of march, he need be under no immediate apprehension. But he cannot help reflecting, on what would have been his fate, if still in the prairie stocks!

That he is not there is something for which to be thankful.

While congratulating himself, he for a moment removes his glance from the desperadoes, directing it to the opposite side—that toward the San Saba. As he does so, there comes a flash across his face, and a glittering in his eyes, for a time obscuring his vision.

When it becomes clear again, he sees what draws from him an ejaculation of joy, his companion giving quick echo to it.

Another party is upon the plain, also horsemen. They are advancing toward the ridge, in a direction diametrically opposite to that followed by the freebooters.

The two troops are about equidistant from the crest, the tree being evidently the beacon-point of both. The swell between hinders them from seeing one another; while Clancy, from his commanding position, has a full view of both.

His joyful exclamation has sprung from the thought, that the second party may be composed of the pursuing colonists. It is quickly succeeded by another proclaiming his certainty of this. For at its head is one riding a horse of a color not common. It is a brindled "clay-bank," with stripes resembling those upon a half-bred zebra. Simeon Woodley's horse has such markings. It must be the backwoodsman who leads the party approaching from the San Saba!

Both cohorts are advancing at a like rate of speed—

not very rapidly, their horses only kept at a brisk walk. But with this continued, a collision will ere long be inevitable.

It is evident they see not one another—have no suspicion of their mutual proximity.

On recovering from his sudden, but gratified, surprise, Clancy perceives how things stand. A glance to right and left enables him to recognize on the one side friends, on the other, foes. And his glance gladdens, as he measures the strength of the two parties—sees that the former is by far the stronger, at all events, in numbers.

There are nearly thirty of them, while of the robber band he can scarce count twenty. At the same time he is aware, that most of these are men of no common character; criminals without conscience; outlaws rendered desperate by their outlawry; fellows who will fight to the death, knowing that, if taken, a halter will be their doom.

But among the colonists are also many brave men; and they are led by one of the bravest, Simeon Woodley. They have God, too, on their side; while the brigands will be doing battle under the banner of the Devil.

He has no anxiety about the result of such encounter. His only apprehension is, that it may not come off. Something may occur to warn the freebooters, and give them a chance to shun it. They will be certain to retreat, at sight of that enemy stronger than themselves, and with right upon its side.

If the two troops would only come near enough, Clancy has confidence in the superior speed of the long-legged American horses. But as yet full two miles are between, and this is too much. A word of warning—a sign to make them suspicious—and the rascals may still escape.

Is there anything to give that word, or show sign? Clancy looks to right, to left, between them. There is nothing upon the plain.

But something above—buzzards! There are two flocks, one over each band of horsemen, accompanying it on its march. These foul birds always do so, their instinct admonishing them that where there are two parties of armed men they may look for a collision between them. They even know when these are hostile, and preparing to spill one another's blood!

Borlase cannot fail to see those soaring over the colonists, while Woodley will equally observe the flock flying above the brigands. On each side what will be the conjecture? This is the question Clancy asks of himself.

Borlase will suppose the birds, flying afar, to be above the head of the man he has left in his prairie stocks. On his side, Woodley may have a fancy—at the same time a fear—that those he sees are about to descend upon a dead body—that of his old comrade, Clancy himself. And there may be two, for the backwoodsman will take Jupiter into account.

It is just as Clancy conjectures. Woodley, from one side, observes a flock of vultures, distinct from that circling over his own head. Borlase, from the opposite, observes another flock, having no connection with those wheeling above his. Both interpret the sign as too insignificant to cause them any apprehension; and each moves on at the head of his following, without halt or hesitation.

"Thank the Lord!" says Clancy, relieved from all further fear. "They must meet now."

Less than a mile now between the two hostile bands; yet unseen by each other.

With heart audibly beating, Clancy keeps his eyes on both, the mulatto sharing his emotion. But while silently observing their mutual approach, the son of the Irish soldier has no intention to be an idle spectator of the conflict soon to ensue. On the contrary, he pants to take part in it; to assist in smiting and crushing the criminal crew; to punish their leader for the outrage recently endured at his hands—for the misery that almost made him mad.

He is prepared to start forth—Jupiter, by his direction, holding the horses in readiness. But the moment has not yet arrived. He must not show himself too soon. Man or horse, appearing in such a place, would excite the suspicion of the pirates, cause them to halt, perhaps to turn, and ride off in retreat.

They are not yet near enough to insure the encounter. By showing himself he might give them a chance to shun it. This must not be; and he remains behind the rock, with quick-beating pulse, alternately glancing from one troop to the other.

Oh! if he could whisper in Simeon Woodley's ear, or make sign to him! But one word or gesture to warn him of what is on the other side!

Is there no way to communicate with his old comrade, without giving alarm to the enemy? Can he steal back behind the ridge, and join the colonists, before they are seen upon its summit?

He looks around, scans the ground to his rear, with his eyes calculating its incline.

Impossible! To retire from the rock would at once discover him to both bands, and to the freebooters first!

He may not move an inch. He must wait for his cue; which will be when they sight one another.

Stay! A thought strikes him—he thinks of a decoy. His eye rests upon the dead body of Darke, and runs over the Indian costume still covering it. Darke's horse is beside him, between Jupiter's legs.

Shall he make use of the dress and the animal, for a time counterfeiting his now lifeless foeman? The plumbed coronet, with the other savage trappings, will enable him to do this. So disguised, he might show himself to the robber band, without fear of them sheering off.

Shall he try the ruse? It is a question of time. Will there be sufficient for him to accomplish it?

He glances at the two troops; again measuring the distance between, and taking note of their rate of speed.

Too late to attempt the travesty! He might be caught in the act of preparing for it.

He abandons the idea, and falls back on his original design.

Curbing his impatience, as he best can, he continues to watch the mutually-approaching parties. Neither is making rapid advance. The slope, growing steeper as they draw nearer the crest of the ridge, gives them reason for sparing their horses. But it cannot be long before they will be face to face.

Neither marches in any order. Both are clumped irregularly—the leaders a little ahead. A tortoise with neck extended would in shape symbolize their formation. They might be compared to two dark clouds, sailing toward one another through a clear sky, both

highly charged with hostile electricity. When they come in collision, surely will the red rain fall.

Up the opposing slopes they continue to advance, still unsuspecting, each of the other. The terrain resembles the roof of a house, pitched at an oblique angle. Clancy's position is that of a man placed upon the ridge, behind a chimney; while the two squadrons are ascending from the eaves. The solitary tree represents another chimney, toward which they are tending. But before reaching it, both will abruptly discontinue the ascent. Clancy knows this.

His heart bounding within his breast, his blood coursing hot through his veins, his pulse beating quicker than ever, he watches and waits—impatiently timing the crisis.

It is very near, now. The two flocks of vultures have met in mid-air, and mingle their flight in sweeping gyrations. They seem jubilant, as if anticipating a speedy repast!

Clancy measures the moments; sees they will be few and short. The crowns of the horsemen rising against the horizon, already align with the tufts of grass growing topmost upon the ridge. Now their brows are above it; now their eyes; they have sighted each other!

It is Clancy's cue. He cries out, "My horse, Jupiter! Mount, and follow me!"

He grasps the bridle; vaults into the saddle, then like a thunderbolt, shoots out from the rock, and on along the ridge.

A halt, as the hostile cohorts catch sight of one another; horses hurriedly pulled up! No shout; only a word of caution from their leaders, each calling back to his own men. Then an interval of profound silence, broken only by the shrill screaming of the horses, and the clattering of hoofs; this last louder, where Clancy himself gallops over the plain.

Both see him now, without taking note. They are too intent in scanning each other.

The scrutiny is confined to the headmost men, the others still mutually screened by the interposed swell of the ground. And there are still several hundred yards of space between them.

But each knows the other to be an enemy; and, despite the distance, the two herculean leaders have already recognized one another—Woodley, Borlase, and Borlase, Woodley.

The recognition is simultaneous; and after it the silence ceases. From the throat of the backwoodsman issues a shout, that peals afar over the plain. It is a cry of vengeful determination, quickly followed by the command to charge.

Borlase, too, utters a cry; but of different intonation. It is that of one suddenly perceiving danger, and preparing to flee it.

In another instant both troops are going at full gallop. But not toward each other. One is pursuing, the other pursued.

The robbers are in retreat!

CHAPTER XXV.

HAND TO HAND.

Riding at full speed, cleaving the air, that whistles past his ears, with eyes straining forward, Clancy sees the charged attitude of the two squadrons.

The conflict he expected has not come off. And it may not?

If it do, will he be in time to take part in it? The thought of being too late gives him a spasm of chagrin.

Only for a moment does he mistrust his horse—perhaps the fastest of all.

Again recovering confidence, he presses on, heading in a diagonal line between pursued and pursuers.

He soon sees that he is closing upon both, and with equal joy, that they are nearing one another. The short-striding mustangs are no match for the long-legged American horses. Ten minutes more, and the two breeds must become mingled!

As yet not a shot has been fired. The distance is still too great for the range of rifles, and backwoodsman do not waste ammunition by idly discharging their guns. The only sounds heard are the strokes of two hundred hoofs, with the occasional neighing of a horse.

The riders are all silent—in both troops alike—one in the mute eagerness of retreat, the other in the stern earnestness of pursuit. The time for clamor—for shouting and shooting—has not yet come.

But both will soon begin. As Clancy sweeps along the oblique line, heading for the space that separates the two parties, he perceives this gradually diminishing.

Soon after he sees puffs of smoke, and jets of flame projected out of them. At the same time, he hears shots; at first dropping and single, then in thick rattling fusillade.

Quickly the plain in front becomes shrouded with a dense sulphurous mist; in which dark forms, at intervals illumed by yellow flashes, can be distinguished struggling and shouting. It is as if two cohorts of hostile demons had met in mid-air and were doing battle amid the clouds of heaven!

As a scene to recall Paradise Lost, as painted by the great poet, Milton.

Clancy does not think of this, as he reviews it from the outside. His only thought is to take a part in the strife—to give aid to the angels, and do damage to the devils, who are contending within.

Another touch to his steed, and he passes through the thin outer strata of the smoke; then finds himself in the thick of the conflict.

Shouts and confusion around him. Men on horseback fighting with other mounted men; pairs in close clutch, grappling and endeavoring to drag each other down; other pairs apart, firing pistols; some with naked blades endeavoring to knife one another!

Notwithstanding the confusion, he can see that the conflict is nearly over, and that the robbers have been routed. Many of them are already dismounted and upon their knees, crying "Quarter," piteously appealing for mercy—begging for dear life!

Soon after the strife terminates, resistance being no longer offered. The victors stand over the vanquished, most of the latter dead; those that still live with pistols held to their heads, or blades pointed at their breasts.

Clancy has come upon the ground too late to have a share in the struggle. It matters not. The criminals have been chastised, meeting the punishment due to their diabolical crimes. His own vengeance has been already appeased by the death of Richard Darke.

He reins up, and looks around, his eye glancing earnestly. He is searching for some one he does not see.

Where is Simeon Woodley? Has he fallen in the confused melee? Has his old comrade been killed?

Half frantic with this new fear, he goes past over the ground, giving a glance at every group. Woodley is nowhere to be seen!

Clancy calls out his name. No answer. Again he shouts "Woodley," and then "Heywood!"

To this there is a response. The young backwoodsman staggers to his side, bleeding and blackened with powder. He is wounded, and badly, though not altogether disabled.

His horse has been shot under him, or he would not be there.

These are his first words on coming up to Clancy: "Why?" asks the latter, anxiously.

"Because Sime Woodley—"

"Ay, Woodley," impatiently interrupts the other.

"Where is he, Heywood?"

"Was here a minute ago, but now—"

"I hope nothing has happened. Has he been shot, or stabbed? Speak quick, Heywood!"

"No, I saw no sign of either. I don't think he's been touched, yet."

"Yet—what then? Where is he?"

"This minute he galloped past, chasing some one. The smoke hindered me from seeing who; but it was a great big fellow, big as Sime himself."

"Borlasse!" exclaims Clancy. "In what direction did they go?"

"They went that way," answers the young hunter, extending his arm outward. "Both were at a gallop. For God's sake, Charley Clancy, ride after! Sime may stand in need of you."

Clancy does not wait to hear the final word. Giving fresh impulse to his steed, he darts through the sulphury cloud that still overhangs the field of fight.

As he comes into clear air, he sees two horsemen going off over the plain, one after the other. Both are men of colossal size. But it does not need this to tell him who they are. At a glance he recognizes them; the pursuer as Woodley, the pursued as Borlasse.

Both are upon large horses, American breed, strong, and able to carry them. But the brigand is only a little way ahead, and the backwoodsman is evidently gaining upon him.

Clancy perceives this with satisfaction, though not without some anxiety. He knows that Jim Borlasse is an antagonist not to be despised. Now about to be bayed, in desperation, he will fight to the bitter end. Woodley will stand in need of all the strength and strategy of which he is master.

Clancy has confidence in him. Still, he dreads danger in the encounter, and the thought of it urges him to increased speed, in the hope of helping his old associate.

Better mounted than either, he soon shortens the distance between himself and them.

Before he can get up, the two have closed together, and are engaged in deadly strife.

It is no conflict apart, with a cracking of rifles or pistols. Not a shot is being exchanged between them. Instead, the combatants are close together; have clutched one another; are fighting, hand to hand, with bowies!

It commences on horseback; but at the first grip both come to the ground, dragging one another out of the saddle. They continue the fight on foot, hewing away with their blades, as if each was determined to hack the flesh from the other's bones!

A grand, but dread spectacle; these two gigantic gladiators engaged in mortal strife, with all their might trying to slay one another!

All the more terrible from the silence that accompanies it. Neither speaks a word. They are too intent upon killing. The only sound that reaches Clancy's ear is their hoarse, stertorous sighing, as they pant to recover breath.

A spectacle that might distress the humane heart; but one that would have elicited peals of applause from that demoralized multitude, who witnessed the contest between Spartacus and his Dacian brother.

Clancy has no thought of being an idle spectator. His heart beats with apprehension for the issue; and with rifle cocked and ready he rides up, looking for a chance to send a bullet through the body of Borlasse.

It is not needed. Neither gun nor pistol is to give the coup de grace to the chief of the prairie pirates. Before Clancy can take aim at him, the blade of a bowie-knife has entered between his ribs, splitting his heart and laying him lifeless along the earth!

"You, Charley Clancy!" says Sime, adding an ejaculation of joy at seeing his friend still safe. "Thank the Lord for it! But who'd 'a' thought o' meetin' you in the middle o' this skimmage? An' up in time to stan' by me, had it been needcessary; which, as ye see, it warn't. Wal, for good intentions, Sime Woodley thanks ye all the same. That skunk o' skunks won't trouble Texas no more. Ain't he a beauty, as he lies thar? But come, Charley! tell me; whar hev you dropt from? What 'bout Dick Darke? Hev you seen anythin' o' him?"

"I have."

"Wal, what's happened? Have you dud anythin' to him?"

"The same as you have done to him," answers Clancy, pointing to the body of Borlasse.

"Good for you! I know'd it 'ud end that way. I say'd so to that sweet critter jest as I war leavin' her at the mishin."

"You left her there, safe?"

"Wal, I left her in her father's arums, whar I reck'n she'll be safe enuf; tho' I knows o' another pair she'd like as well hev'n' aroun' her—prehaps a goodish grist better. But whar's Jupe?"

"He's here—somewhere upon the field."

"All right. That accounts for the hul party. Now, let's go back, an' see what's chanced to the rest o' Borlasse's lot. I reck'n they've been disposed o' much in a sim'lar way, and these hyur puralras are now cleared of a crowd o' scoundrels, the biggest and bloodiest as ever ranged over 'em. Dog-goned ef they warn't!"

After this emphatic declaration, the old hunter stands for a while contemplating the body of Borlasse; the expression upon his countenance as that of one who looks upon a wolf, or wild-cat, he has just killed.

Seeming satisfied, he at length says:

"Kum along, Charley, an' let the varmint lay! As for givin' him Christyun berril, it w'd be wastin' both work an' time; besides taintin' the earth that 'ud kiver him. He's jest fit for what's soon to be dud to him—to be ate up by them buzzarts as air floppin' above, an' you coyots waitin' to git at him. So, let's along. Charley; an' you, Jim Borlasse, good-by!"

With this odd leave-taking, the backwoodsman turns away from the body of the dead brigand; coolly wipes his blood from his bowie; restores it to its sheath; and once more bestriding his horse, rides off, Clancy with him, to rejoin the victorious colonists.

On reaching the spot still occupied by these, a sanguinary scene comes under their eyes—the terrible tableau presented by a field of late conflict and carnage. Nearly all of the freebooters have fallen, and are now lying astretch upon the plain—some on their backs, some on their faces, and some sideways, but all dead, all gashed or gory, as they fell to stab or shot.

Those that yet live are gathered in a group, and guarded by settlers, who stand sentry around them.

Some of these, too, have succumbed; for the conflict was desperate, hand to hand, with scarce any quarter given, and not much asked.

The stolen treasure is likewise there—collected into a heap, in pouches, saddle-bags, and otherwise, as it has been taken from the bodies of the dead brigands, and the persons of those still alive. It is all safe, none of it now likely to be taken to San Antone; but sure of finding its way back to the coffers from which it came.

A strange and sanguinary picture is that presented upon the field where the terrible struggle has terminated!

Soon it changes aspect, though not to lose any of its heart-saddening effect. It is equally distressing to look upon that spot after the victors have departed. For the vanquished still remain, their bodies unburied, the sky above shadowed with black vultures, the earth around crowded with red coyotes!

Does it need to say that our tale is ended?

The reader will make answer, that it does not. He knows what came after, or can guess it, in almost every particular. It would be like repeating an old story to tell him, that the victorious colonists returned to the San Saba mission, taking with them their dead comrades, along with their live prisoners; where the latter were tried, condemned, and hanged, even before the former were consigned to their graves!

And when an interval of sadness had elapsed—a solemnity due to the feelings of those bereaved—joy once more pervaded the colony, joy nearly general.

It reached its climax, on that day when the two beautiful daughters of Colonel Armstrong, robed in bridal array, stood before the altar of the ancient capilla, and gave consent to changing their surnames; one of them ever after to be called Jessie Dupre, the other Helen Clancy.

There was a third couple made man and wife on the same day, though not at the same hour. By a special service Jupe and Jule were joined in holy wedlock; Jupiter making a vow of fealty to his brown-skinned bride, more like to be faithfully kept, than any ever taken by his heathen homonym.

That wedding-day witnessed a hilarity in the old mission house such as it had never seen; with a festive profuseness exceeding anything ever attempted by the monks. For Dupre having recovered his stolen treasure, set no bounds to his hospitality. Whole beeves were barbecued, hampers of wine broken open, and boxes of best Havanas freely distributed.

Amidst the festivities there was one man who was not, could not be, gay.

It was the young surgeon, Wharton. For his sadness no one, save himself, could be held blamable. He knew this; and determined to stifle it, or make an effort to do so, by devoting himself to the duties of his profession.

There is a record that he succeeded. At least, such was the belief in the San Saba colony, years after, when it had grown to be a prosperous settlement, and a town rose over the site of the ancient mission. It was a Court-House town, the center of a district of cotton plantations; one of the largest and most flourishing, having Charles Clancy for proprietor.

Both the town and plantations are still there; the markets of the former being well supplied with venison, and other game—the product of four of the truest rifles in Texas. This will be believed, when it is known that Woodley, Hawkins, Heywood, and Tucker are the permanent hunters of the place.

These worthies may be often seen sauntering through the streets, having returned from, or about to start forth, on some hunting expedition.

And on one of the San Saba plantations—that of Colonel Armstrong himself—may be seen two other personages presented in this tale, it is hoped not without interest attached to them. They are Blue Bill and his Phoebe; not alone, but surrounded by a numerous progeny of picanninies.

It may be asked how these got there; a question easily answered, thus: The disgrace brought upon him by his ill-starred son sent Ephraim Darke to an early grave, and at the breaking up of his establishment, the coon-hunter came to the hammer.

As a reward for his truthfulness, as also his courage in declaring it, measures were taken by Colonel Armstrong to secure his purchase at the slave sale.

These proving effectual, Blue Bill was bought, with all his belongings, and transported to a happier home on the far frontier of Texas.

THE END.

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